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# MAPLE STREET PRESS CORNHUSKER KICKOFF 2009

AN ANNUAL GUIDE TO NEBRASKA FOOTBALL



## Ready to Lead

Can Ndamukong Suh bring Nebraska back to the top of the Big 12 North?

**PELINI: THE RIGHT  
MAN FOR THE JOB**

**5 PLAYERS THAT WILL  
MAKE THE SEASON**

**OSBORNE ON THE STATE  
OF HUSKER NATION**

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MEMORIAL STADIUM

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THE ACTION: NOT THE GOAL BUT THE GAME: I



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Thank you for choosing *Cornhusker Kickoff 2009*. I'm proud to offer the second edition of our Nebraska football yearbook, and although the name has changed since last season's *A Sea of Red*, you're still going to find coverage of the upcoming Nebraska football season that's second to none. *Cornhusker Kickoff* is solely dedicated to the Cornhuskers. While other national college football preview magazines provide only a page or two glimpse of your Cornhuskers, we provide you with complete coverage of the team, the opponents, and all the analysis in between.

A lot of amazing things happened last season. Bo Pelini became a head coach, not just in name or title, but with the proof of what he could do on the field. As Adam Nettina points out in his article about Pelini's first year, the previous head coach failed to win a single game in four years when behind at halftime, while Pelini's squad pulled it off twice last season. The team could have folded up after the three-game losing streak, but instead they rallied to win six of their last seven games. If that's not a testament to the coaching staff we currently have running things in Lincoln, I don't know what is.

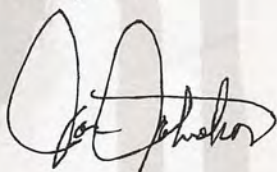
I don't know of any Husker fan that expects a national championship, but everyone expects that we'll continue on with the momentum of last season despite the challenges ahead. There are some constant themes to the season found in these pages. Will a new starting quarterback and an unproven set of receivers perform well in the passing game? Will the offensive line and running backs evoke memories of the powerful rushing teams of the past? Will the Blackshirt defense once again destroy the will of their opponents? Will Ndamukong Suh squash another opposing quarterback on his way to the end zone again this season?

*Cornhusker Kickoff 2009* represents quite a mix of authors, from some of Nebraska's best newspaper journalists to Internet bloggers whose writing is driven by their passion for Husker football. I'm proud of the range we present, not only in content, but in form as well.

I would enjoy hearing any feedback you have about *Cornhusker Kickoff*, and, in fact, view your purchase of this book as the start of a new relationship. I'd like to invite you to join the discussions at the website I operate, *Corn Nation*.

Once again, thanks for your purchase, I hope you enjoy the book.

Go Big Red!



Jon Johnston, Arts & Sciences, '87

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to my wife, Heidi, and my kids, Noah, Natalya, and Isaiah for putting up with me while I struggled to get this thing together. To Bryan Davidson at Maple Street Press for putting up with my constant complaining about photography, publisher Jim Walsh for having me back for another year, and Robert Chong at Getty Images for coming through.

I also want to thank the numbers of nameless college football fans I've run into throughout years who have listened to me ramble on about my favorite team without calling the police, having me committed, or simply punching me in the face when humanity might have been better served by any one of the three.



# MAPLE STREET PRESS

# CORNHUSKER

# KICKOFF

## 2009

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# BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION

## 2009 Cornhusker Position Breakdown

*by Jon Johnston*

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**I**n a single season, Bo Pelini brought the team back from the depths of 2007, battled through a three-game losing streak, and finished with a flurry, including a comeback win over a tough Clemson team in the Gator Bowl. An initial season like that has to have Husker fans wondering what Pelini can do in his second year.

Unfortunately, 2009 isn't without its challenges, the foremost of which is replacing the most successful quarterback and wide receiver combination in Nebraska's history. This year the offense will have a new field general, but it's rare that first-year quarterbacks execute the offense without some missteps along the way. Thankfully, the offensive line, running backs, and tight ends are strong, which will help to establish a solid running game. This will take the pressure of the new quarterback and a group of talented but unproven receivers. The schedule sets up nicely, with two undermanned Sun Belt Conference foes coming to Lincoln before the Huskers must travel to Blacksburg to face a very good Virginia Tech team.

If Nebraska is to win the Big 12 North, the next step in the return to prominence, the defense must become the strength of the team.

The latter part of last season the Husker defense played well enough to once again earn the title "Blackshirts." There were some rough moments where poor tackling and missed assignments caused problems, but overall the play of the defense was vastly improved. The Huskers were the most improved team in the nation in total team sacks, increasing their total by 22, moving up 98 spots in national rankings to 13th. They were also the most improved team in rushing defense, moving up 95 spots to 22nd, while allowing 115.7 fewer yards per game. The defense enters the season with some concern about

experience, but with much better overall depth than they had last season. There is no reason to expect that the defense won't be better.



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# QUARTERBACKS

Replacing quarterback Joe Ganz is, without a doubt, the biggest challenge the Huskers face going into the 2009 season. Ganz's relatively short career as a starter (16 starts) left him holding 23 Nebraska school records, including single-game records for passing yards (510), total offense (528), and passing touchdowns (7). He finished second behind Zac Taylor in career passing yards with 5,125 and passing touchdowns with 44. It's an understatement to say that whoever takes over for Ganz has some pretty big shoes to fill.

The most surprising news to come out of spring ball was the announcement that Patrick Witt would transfer.

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
17	Green, Cody	QB	6-4	215	Fr.
3	Lee, Zac	QB	6-2	210	Jr.
7	Spano, Kody	QB	6-2	215	RFr.
7	Washington, Latravis	QB	6-3	225	Jr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

PASSING	G	Comp	Att	Pct	Yds	TD	Int	Eff	Yds/G
Lee, Zac	2	1	2	50.0	5	—	—	71.0	2.5

RUSHING	G	Att	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	Yds/G
Lee, Zac	2	2	17	8.5	—	11	8.5

At the time, there was speculation that Witt pressured Bo Pelini name him the starter, but it later turned out that Witt transferred for academic reasons, and that his chosen destination was Yale.

Witt was the most experienced returning quarterback and was expected to battle junior **Zac Lee** for the start, but his transfer leaves Lee the de facto starter. Lee played in two games last season. He was on the field late in the New Mexico State game where he attempted two passes, completing one for eight yards. Against Kansas State he had two rushes for a total of 17 yards. Despite little playing time, Lee has been around the program long enough to learn Shawn Watson's complex offense, which should bring forth a flashback for Husker fans of Ganz walking on the field to replace an injured Sam Keller against Texas in 2007. The flashback becomes more appropriate when considering Lee's resemblance to Ganz in terms of mobility and style of play.

A second spring surprise came when it was announced that junior linebacker **Latravis Washington** would switch to quarterback. Washington, a junior, has contributed on special teams the past two seasons, but played quarterback in high school. Washington looked comfortable in the 2009 spring game, completing 21-31 passes for 190 yards. It was as



*Joe Ganz set 23 school records in his relatively short career. His success will be difficult to replace.*

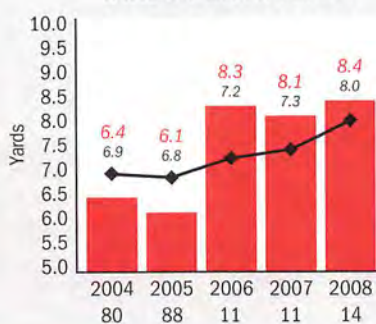
## STATISTICAL TRENDS

■ Nebraska ◆ Big 12 Average

### PASSING EFFICIENCY



### YARDS PER ATTEMPT



### THIRD DOWN CONVERSIONS







*Husker fans hope that Zac Lee can duplicate Joe Ganz's success at quarterback.*

if he were a natural at the position. Washington has a strong arm, leading to complaints from receivers during spring practice. He is big and athletic, but the biggest question for Washington is: How quickly can he learn and execute Shawn Watson's offense?

**Kody Spano** redshirted last season after being the sole quarterback in Bo Pelini's first recruiting class. Spano originally committed to Oklahoma State until Cowboy Head Coach Mike Gundy informed Spano that an early scholarship would not be available for him. Spano felt slighted, and began looking for another school. Nebraska entered the picture as Bill Callahan recruit Blaine Gabbert jumped ship to Missouri, leaving the Husker coaches scrambling to find a quarterback. All this led to Spano's arrival at Nebraska. Unfortunately, Spano suffered a knee injury during spring practice and underwent surgery. He should be ready for fall, but it's questionable as to how much mobility he'll have by the start of the season and if the lack of practice time has hindered his development.

True freshman **Cody Green** has done everything right to jump-start his Husker career. Like Spano, Green graduated and enrolled early at Nebraska so he could get an early jump on learning the offense. Green has plenty of talent, ranked as the #6 dual-threat quarterback by *Rivals.com*, while *Scout.com* ranked him as the #7 national quarterback prospect.

The best scenario for Green would be a redshirt season in 2009, if for no other reason than if the coaches feel they have to go to him it'll be because the other quarterbacks are struggling. It's a lot to ask a kid who's just turned 18 to come

to get comfortable as a starter? If Lee looks like the second coming of Joe Ganz, what receivers will step up to replace Nate Swift and Todd Peterson? Will Watson stick with a single quarterback taking the vast majority of the snaps, regardless of the game situation?

Lee, Washington, and Green are all mobile quarterbacks that give Watson the versatility to run his "multiple" offense, whether it features a heavy, two tight end formation, the spread option, or zone-read. The good news for Husker fans is that the early schedule is set up in favor of a new starting quarterback. The Huskers open up against two Sun Belt Conference teams at home before going on the road to face Virginia Tech. The biggest key for the starting quarterback in 2009 may not be the ability to make big plays, but the ability to avoid big mistakes. **MSP**

into a nationally known program, learn a new offensive system, and start his freshman year on campus. Despite the pressure and obstacles, Green looked like a natural leader during the spring game (as natural as wearing a green jersey allows) and his size gives him a commanding presence on the field.

Many questions surround the quarterback position heading into 2009. How much will Shawn Watson's offense change from last year? Can Nebraska's running game provide Lee time

## RECORD BOOK

### TOUCHDOWN PASSES, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Zac Taylor	2006	26
2	Joe Ganz	2008	25
3	Vince Ferragamo	1976	20
4	Zac Taylor	2005	19
	Gerry Gdowski	1989	19

### TOUCHDOWN PASSES, CAREER

Rank	Player	Years	Total
1	Zac Taylor	2005-06	45
2	Joe Ganz	2005-08	44
3	Tommie Frazier	1992-95	43
4	Dave Humm	1972-74	41
5	Turner Gill	1980-83	34

### RECENT TD PASS LEADERS

Player	Year	Total
Joe Ganz	2008	25
Joe Ganz	2007	16
Zac Taylor	2006	26
Zac Taylor	2005	19
Joe Dailey	2004	17



# RUNNING BACKS

Husker fans have to be feeling pretty comfortable with the running back position due to the return of the Roy Helu Jr. and Quentin Castille. The two should develop into one of the best back tandems in the Big 12 this season. Despite the cozy feeling, it's imperative the Huskers find a dependable third back, as the season exacts quite a toll on running backs. The Husker coaches must be feeling comfortable with their options, as spring saw Marcus Mendoza—the only I-back besides Helu and Castille to carry the ball last season—switch to the wide receiver position.



*With an improved offensive line, Roy Helu Jr. is poised to have an outstanding season.*

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
19	Castille, Quentin	IB	6-1	235	Jr.
30	Hays, Mike	FB	6-1	240	So.
10	Helu Jr., Roy	IB	6-0	215	Jr.
28	Jones, Austin	IB	5-10	210	So.
29	Okafor, Collins	IB	6-1	225	RFr.
14	Ward, Lester	IB	6-3	215	RFr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

RUSHING	G	Att	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	Yds/G
Helu Jr., Roy	13	125	803	6.4	7	57	61.8
Castille, Quentin	13	106	467	4.4	6	58	35.9
RECEIVING	G	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	Yds/G
Helu Jr., Roy	13	25	266	10.6	—	27	20.5
Castille, Quentin	13	9	109	12.1	—	31	8.4

I-back Marlon Lucky is gone after a career which saw him rush for over 2,000 yards, set a single-season reception record, and finish in the top five all-time for career all-purpose yards and career receptions. Lucky started the first 11 games in 2008, but was replaced at Colorado due to injury. His senior season might be considered a disappointment, but his career clearly cannot.

A constant theme throughout spring was the replacement of Joe Ganz, Nate Swift, and Todd Peterson. It will take time for a new quarterback to develop, and there is no better way to take the pressure off than to have a dependable running game.

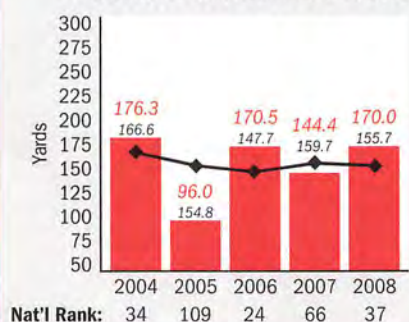
## I-BACKS

Despite starting only two games last season, Roy Helu Jr. finished as the top rusher and was key as the running game improved during the later part of the season. Helu's 6.4 yard-per-carry average was the best by a Husker running back in seven seasons, and he had three 100-yard games despite splitting time with Lucky and Quentin Castille. Helu's emergence last season got him enough notice to earn All-Big 12 honorable mention

## STATISTICAL TRENDS

■ Nebraska ◆ Big 12 Average

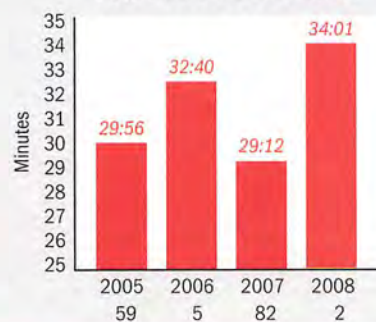
### RUSHING YARDS PER GAME



### RUSHING TOUCHDOWNS



### TIME OF POSSESSION





honors. Helu has added weight coming into 2009, presumably to provide more bulk to withstand the pounding. Injury is a concern, as Helu sat out some of spring practice and the Red-White Spring Game due to a hamstring problem.

**Quentin Castille** will split time with Helu again this season. Castille started his career as a power back used in short yardage situations but has since dropped weight and become much more versatile. Castille's best game last season came in the Gator Bowl when both Helu and Lucky were out due to injury. It was then he displayed his ability to be a featured back when he gained 125 yards on 18 carries, with long runs of 58 and 40 yards. His development as a receiver progressed, further proving his versatility.

Behind the duo are two redshirt freshmen and a walk-on sophomore. Sophomore **Austin Jones** has looked good in the past two spring games, but has yet to get a single carry in a game. Redshirt freshmen **Collins Okafor** and **Lester Ward** will compete to fit into the rotation. Both have had a year to get stronger and prepare for the college game. They got a heavy workout during the spring game and both looked ready for action, with Okafor scoring on a 33-yard touchdown run. The pair brings speed and athleticism, with Okafor perhaps having a slight edge in receiving and power. Two more redshirt freshmen, **Jordan Makovicka** and **Jeremy Wallace**, provide depth.

Newcomer **Rex Burkhead** could be wildcard this season as an incoming freshman. Nicknamed "Superman," Burkhead played quarterback, receiver, running back, and defensive back in high school. He's already shown he can be a complete player at the high school level and may have too much talent to sit on the sideline.

## FULLBACKS

Fullbacks didn't have a single carry in 2008 and, if you don't count "fullback" Ndamukong Suh's two-yard touchdown reception, had only a single reception. If the fullback was a non-glamorous position before, it has largely become non-existent as offensive coordinators prefer speed and agility over grit and power. Fullbacks could see a lot more work in 2009, however, as the offense gears more toward a power running game early in the season.

Thomas Lawson is gone after starting for the past two seasons. Lawson had only one carry in 2008, but in 2007 he had three touchdown receptions.

Sophomore **Mike Hays** and junior **Justin Makovicka**



*By the end of last season, Quentin Castille had developed into a complete back. He and Roy Helu Jr. will be one of the best running back tandems in the Big 12 this season.*

are the most likely candidates to replace Lawson. Hays spent his time last season on special teams, playing in all 13 games. Makovicka's brother Jordan plays I-back on this year's team, but his older brothers Jeff and Joel were standout fullbacks. Jeff was the starter on the '95 national title team, while Joel ranks third among fullbacks in career rushing yardage.

Other fullbacks include sophomores **Kevin Thomsen** and **Tyler Legate**, both walk-ons.

Legate is a transfer from South Dakota.

The Huskers enter 2009 with a solid group of running backs, but some concern regarding depth. With a good set of backs and tight ends, Husker fans have to be thinking that the offense will use more of a West Coast style attack this season, at least until a new starting quarterback gets comfortable. **MSP**

## RECORD BOOK

### RUSHING YARDS, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Mike Rozier	1983	2,148
2	Ahman Green	1997	1,877
3	Lawrence Phillips	1994	1,722
4	Mike Rozier	1982	1,689
5	Ken Clark	1988	1,497

### RUSHING YARDS, CAREER

Rank	Player	Years	Total
1	Mike Rozier	1981-83	4,780
2	Ahman Green	1995-97	3,880
3	Eric Crouch	1998-01	3,434
4	Calvin Jones	1991-93	3,153
5	Ken Clark	1987-89	3,037

### RECENT RUSHING LEADERS

Player	Year	Total
Roy Helu Jr.	2008	803
Marlon Lucky	2007	1,019
Brandon Jackson	2006	989
Cory Ross	2005	882
Cory Ross	2004	1,102



# WIDE RECEIVERS

Nate Swift and Todd Peterson combined for 125 receptions and 1,727 receiving yards last season, but they weren't your typical playmakers. Normally when fans think of playmaking receivers, they're usually thinking about speed. Fans drool over plays where the speedy guy catches the long bomb and runs past the defenders on his way to the end zone. Rarely is something as simple as route-running



*Wide receiver Niles Paul will need to make big plays in the passing game this season, as the Huskers look to replace the output of Nate Swift and Todd Peterson.*

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
2	Bell, Antonio	WR	6-2	180	Fr.
1	Brooks, Chris	WR	6-2	215	Sr.
6	Cooper, Khiry	WR	6-2	195	RFr.
11	Gilleylen, Curenski	WR	6-0	220	So.
8	Henry, Will	WR	6-5	215	Jr.
18	Holt, Menelik	WR	6-4	220	Sr.
21	Marlowe, Tim	WR	5-10	175	RFr.
32	Mendoza, Marcus	WR	5-10	185	So.
24	Paul, Niles	WR	6-1	215	Jr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

RECEIVING	G	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	Yds/G
Holt, Menelik	12	30	355	11.8	1	25	29.6
Paul, Niles	13	23	214	9.3	—	21	16.5
Brooks, Chris	11	2	27	13.5	1	25	2.5
Gilleylen, Curenski	11	2	11	5.5	—	6	1.0
Mendoza, Marcus	4	2	7	3.5	—	7	1.8
Cammack, Wes	13	1	5	5.0	—	5	0.4

RUSHING	G	Att	Yds	Avg	TD	Long	Yds/G
Mendoza, Marcus	4	15	103	6.9	1	35	25.8
Paul, Niles	13	1	-6	-6.0	—	-6.0	-0.5

considered part of the playmaker's repertoire, but that is where Swift and Peterson excelled. Both were sure-handed, dependable playmakers with a knack for finding the open spot on the field, giving quarterback Joe Ganz not one, but a pair of receivers he could count on. They are gone now and one of the biggest challenges for the Huskers in 2009 is finding dependable receivers to replace them. The key word here is "dependable."

Big things are expected from senior **Menelik Holt** and junior **Niles Paul**. They are the two top returning receivers in 2009, having caught 53 balls for 569 yards between them. Holt is Nebraska's top returning receiver and has played in 32 games over the past three seasons. He started four games

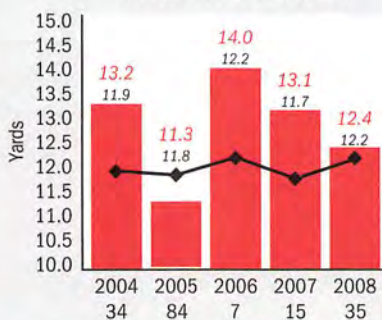
## STATISTICAL TRENDS

■ Nebraska ◆ Big 12 Average

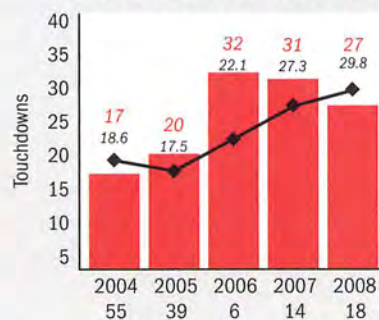
### PASSING YARDS PER GAME



### YARDS PER CATCH



### RECEIVING TOUCHDOWNS





in 2008, scoring one touchdown that came on the last play of the Missouri game. Holt appeared on his way to becoming a bigger part of the offense until he was injured in the Baylor game. Holt's size and athleticism should remind Husker fans of Maurice Purify, just like Husker fans hope Holt makes them forget Purify in 2009.

Special teams have provided Paul the best showcase for his playmaking abilities. He scored on a 86-yard kickoff return against San Jose State to break open a tight game and against Texas Tech he had a 69-yard kickoff return. 2009 brings hope that Paul can show his game-breaking speed as a receiver. Unfortunately, Paul was suspended during the spring season after being arrested for suspicion of driving under the influence. The outcome of his suspension is yet to be determined.

The rest of the receiving corps—Curenski Gilleylen, Will Henry, Marcus Mendoza, Wes Cammack, and Chris Brooks—have less than 10 career receptions between them with one touchdown.

Senior **Chris Brooks** enters his final season still looking to capitalize on great potential after being highly touted as a recruit. He played in 11 games in 2008, seeing more action at the end of the season and finally scoring his first career touchdown against Kansas. Brooks played well in the Red-White Spring Game, catching five passes for 48 yards.

**Marcus Mendoza** played in four games as a running back, but made the switch to wide receiver during the spring. As a running back, he gained 103 yards on 15 carries, but had only two receptions. Mendoza brings much-desired speed to the receiver position and may also see time as a punt returner.

At 6'5", junior **Will Henry** is the tallest wide receiver on the roster. He played in nine games last season, mostly on special teams, and did not have a reception. In order for Henry to make an impact, he must become a more physical receiver.

Like Paul, sophomore **Curenski Gilleylen's** biggest plays have come on special teams, having two kickoff returns for over 20 yards in 2008. Fans may remember the 2008 spring game in which he caught a 77-yard touchdown pass, but unfortunately he hasn't done much on the field since then. Gilleylen must continue to develop his pass-catching skills so that he can get on the field and contribute to the 2009 offense. Senior **Wes Cammack** provides more depth to the receiving corp. Cammack had only a single reception for five yards last season, but played in all 13 games, contributing heavily on special teams.

Given the wide-open nature of the receiver position, the door has been left open for younger players to contribute. Redshirt freshmen **Tim Marlowe**, **Khiry Cooper**, and **Steven Osborne** will push for playing time. Cooper spent the



*Nate Swift was dependable—setting the Husker career all-time reception record—and won't be easy to replace.*

spring playing for the Husker baseball team, but will rejoin football for fall practice. Marlowe may be used as a returner due to his speed, and was one of the 2008 Offensive Scout Team MVPs. At 6'4", Osborne brings a height advantage. His twin brother Courtney plays defense for the Huskers.

Two first-year players may have the talent to gain a lot of playing time this season. Freshman **Antonio Bell** was originally part of the 2008 recruiting class, but failed to qualify academically. After qualifying by winter, he enrolled at Nebraska in order to join the football team for spring practice. During the spring game, Bell wowed the over 77,000 in attendance with a leaping catch over a defender. He has a very strong chance of playing as a true freshman due to his combination of size, speed, and athleticism.

**Brandon Kinnie** is a JUCO transfer with good size (6'3", 215 pounds) and athleticism. He joins the team in the fall, and will require some time to adjust to a higher level of play, but Kinnie could be another strong consideration in 2009.

Someone in this bunch must become the "go to" guy for a new starting quarterback. There is talent available, it's only a matter of who it's going to be. Finding that receiver may make the difference in whether Nebraska takes the Big 12 North crown.



# TIGHT ENDS

Coming into the 2009 season, the tight end unit is the deepest and most versatile that Husker fans have seen in quite a while. The ideal tight end is a mutant combination of an offensive lineman, helping clear the way for running backs, and wide receiver, another weapon in the passing game.

Many of the Big 12 teams run a spread formation that favors three or four wide receivers. Nebraska's offense is "multiple" and uses a variety of formations involving tight ends, including everything from a spread with three receivers and one tight end, to a "heavy" formation featuring three tight ends and fullback. At times, the tight end must shift into the fullback position and provide lead blocking for the I-back, at others they'll be expected to line up in the spread and function as a receiver in the passing game.

A good tight end can cause match-up problems in the passing game. Receivers will be covered by cornerbacks with help from safeties, leaving linebackers to cover the tight end. If the tight end can outrun the linebacker, the defense has problems. The best tight ends can block as well as run and catch, leaving the defense guessing as to what play is coming next.



*The 2009 tight ends unit will be a cornerstone of the team. Look for Dreu Young to excel with blocking and big plays this season.*

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
81	Cotton, Ben	TE	6-6	240	RFr.
80	Hill, Ryan	TE	6-3	250	So.
44	McNeill, Mike	TE	6-4	240	Jr.
25	Reed, Kyler	TE	6-3	225	RFr.
49	Young, Dreu	TE	6-4	245	Jr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

RECEIVING	G	Rec	Yds	Avg	TDs	Long	Yds/G
McNeill, Mike	13	32	442	13.8	6	53	34
Young, Dreu	13	9	140	15.6	1	55	10.8
Hill, Ryan	13	3	9	3.0	1	6	0.7

Hunter Teafatiller is the only tight end gone from last season. Teafatiller played in 12 games, splitting time between tight end and fullback, but had only three receptions in a season that saw him get two starts. Otherwise, the top three tight ends return from last season.

In 2008, junior **Mike McNeill** was one of the biggest surprise performers of the year as he set a single-season school record for the most receptions by a tight end with 32. He started in 12 games (although not against Clemson, when Nebraska opened in a three wide receiver set with two I-backs) and became a steady part of the offense, catching at least one pass in every game with the exception of San Jose State. The high point of his season came against Colorado when he caught three passes for 70 yards, including a 44-yard touchdown reception out of a spread formation in which he simply outran the Buffalo linebacker on a seam route to tie the game. The play was an example of McNeill's speed and why he is so dangerous. If McNeill has a weakness it is his blocking, which must improve for him to become an all-around tight end.

Junior **Dreu Young** returns after a good sophomore season in which he started four times when the offense started in a double tight end set. Young displayed his speed and pass-catching talent during the first game of the season against Western Michigan when he got past two defenders and made an over the shoulder grab on his way to a 55-yard gain. His first career touchdown came late against Texas Tech on a two-yard play-action pass reception. Young also became a steady performer, catching a pass in seven games. Like McNeill, Young has the speed to stretch the field, with two of his nine receptions going for over 20 yards.

Sophomore **Ryan Hill** played in all 13 games last season primarily as the third tight end behind McNeill and Young. Hill's first career touchdown (and only one in 2008) came on a play-action pass against Baylor in which the Huskers were lined up in a heavy formation, with three tight ends and a fullback.



Beyond the top three are a couple of capable redshirt freshmen who should see some playing time in 2009. **Ben Cotton** gave Husker fans a glimpse of his abilities during the Red-White Spring Game when he caught four passes for 48 yards, including a 24-yard touchdown reception. Cotton is the son of associate head coach/offensive line coach Barney Cotton. He's also the tallest amongst the tight end unit. **Kyler Reed** showed his big play ability in the Red-White game when he caught a pass near the sideline and outran all defenders on his way to the end zone for a 71-yard touchdown. Reed was originally targeted to play fullback—during his recruiting process, *ESPN.com* ranked him as the number one fullback in the nation.

Sophomore **Jay Martin** started his Husker career as a linebacker and switched to tight end last season but didn't see the field. Redshirt freshmen **Damon Bechtold** and **Mychael McClure** will provide depth at the position. Bechtold is a walk-on from Omaha Westside. McClure is another player who was originally targeted to play linebacker and switched to tight end.



*Matt Herian is the all-time career reception leader at the tight end position with 65. In two years, Mike McNeill has 33, over halfway there.*



*Mike McNeill broke Johnny Mitchell's single-season tight end reception record. Mitchell had 31 receptions in 1991, then left for the NFL after his sophomore season.*

The 2009 tight ends are a very capable group that provides Shawn Watson's offense with the versatility he desires. That versatility was on display last season as tight ends scored in a number of different situations: Hill's short play-action pass within the red zone from a heavy formation; Young's play-action touchdown out of a two tight end formation with two receivers split wide; and McNeill's 44-yard reception out of a three wide receiver spread formation. Having a number of good tight ends provides different options by which the offense may outwit the defense. Nebraska has a clear advantage in that area this season. **MSP**

## RECORD BOOK

### RECEIVING YARDS, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Johnny Rodgers	1972	942
2	Nate Swift	2008	941
3	Johnny Rodgers	1971	872
4	Maurice Purify	2007	814
5	Irving Fryar	1983	780

### RECEIVING YARDS, CAREER

Rank	Player	Years	Total
1	Johnny Rodgers	1970-72	2,479
2	Nate Swift	2005-08	2,476
3	Terrence Nunn	2004-07	1,762
4	Matt Davison	1997-00	1,456
5	Maurice Purify	2006-07	1,444

### RECENT RECEIVING LEADERS

Player	Year	Total
Nate Swift	2008	941
Maurice Purify	2007	814
Maurice Purify	2006	630
Nate Swift	2005	641
Ross Pilkington	2004	337



# OFFENSIVE LINE

The key to a successful season starts with the offensive line. The Huskers must be able to run the ball in 2009. This doesn't mean a return to the run-heavy teams of the Osborne era, where the opponent was pounded into submission in the fourth quarter (although it'd be nice), but it does mean the Huskers need to physically dominate Big 12 defensive lines so they're able to run the ball when it's required.

The running game was stagnant in early 2008, but got stronger as the season went on. Nebraska finishing ranked 37th in rushing offense, averaging just under 170 yards per game with a 4.5 yards-per-carry average. That was good enough to finish fourth in the Big 12 behind Oklahoma State (8th, 245.5 ypg, 5.5 avg.), Oklahoma (20th, 198.5 ypg, 4.7 avg.), and Baylor (21st, 195.8 ypg, 4.9 avg.). Building on that performance will require finding replacements for Matt Slauson, Lydon Murtha, and Mike Huff, who had 79 starts between them.



*Matt Slauson started every game at right guard last season. The right guard position is up for grabs this year—the only line position without a clear starter.*

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year	G	GS
72	Burkes, Jaivorio	T	6-5	295	Jr.	13	4
58	Caputo, Mike	C	6-1	275	So.	6	—
62	Christensen, Andy	G	6-3	310	Sr.	—	—
74	Henry, Ricky	G	6-4	300	Jr.	—	—
67	Hickman, Jacob	C	6-4	295	Sr.	13	13
73	Jones, D.J.	G	6-5	315	Jr.	2	—
78	Jones, Marcel	T	6-7	310	So.	13	1
63	Meyer, Derek	T	6-5	315	Sr.	—	—
65	Smith, Mike	T	6-6	290	Jr.	13	12
68	Williams, Keith	G	6-5	320	Jr.	13	9

At first glance, there's the impression the Huskers have lost a lot of experience. Unfortunately, Mike Huff never seemed to find a rhythm in 2008 and was replaced as a starter at left guard a third of the way through the season by Mike Smith, and Lydon Murtha was inconsistent due to injuries, missing four games in both 2007 and 2008. Matt Slauson was the most dependable of the three, starting every game at right guard last season, and playing well enough to gain second-team All-Big 12 honors from the Associated Press and Big 12 coaches.

There's fair experience available in 2009—the only position without a returning starter is right guard. The line could use more depth, however, as the 12-game regular season schedule takes quite a pounding on the big guys. One significant injury could have a lot of impact on this season.

Junior **Mike Smith** has played in 25 games over the past two seasons, including 12 starts in 2008 at left tackle. Smith started his career as a defensive end, switching to the offensive line in the spring of 2007. He is expected to hold down the left tackle position through 2009.

Junior **Keith Williams** has played in 23 games over the past two seasons, and started nine times in 2008. He took over the left guard position from Mike Huff four games into the year and started every game for the rest of the season.

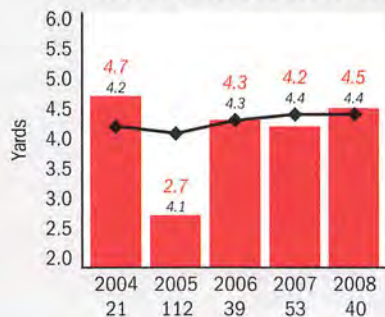
## STATISTICAL TRENDS

■ Nebraska ◆ Big 12 Average

### SCORING OFFENSE



### RUSHING YARDS PER ATTEMPT



### PASS ATTEMPTS PER SACK





Senior **Jacob Hickman** has 23 total career starts over the past three seasons. He received All-Big 12 honorable mention honors the past two seasons and was one of only two linemen to start every game in 2008 (Slauson). Hickman played center in 2008, but during spring ball switched to right guard. A clear starter on the line, Hickman's ability to play multiple positions gives the line extra depth.

Sophomore **Mike Caputo** began his career as a walk-on, but has played well enough that in the spring he moved into the starting center position as Hickman moved to right guard. Caputo may start at center as the season starts and will likely fit into the line rotation in 2009.

Junior **Jaivorio Burkes** has had seven career starts and has played in 17 games over the past two seasons. He was the heir apparent to Lydon Murtha at right tackle in 2009, but he sat out spring football due to a medical condition. Husker coaches have been quiet about Burkes, so his future is uncertain. Sophomore **Marcel Jones** played in all 13 games in 2008, starting against Western Michigan, and playing nearly the whole game against



*The offensive line must come together quickly as a unit before they head to Blacksburg to take on the highly-touted Virginia Tech Hokies.*

Kansas State with Murtha and Burkes injured. He is the projected starter at right tackle should Burkes not be available.

Junior **D.J. Jones** played in two games last season and can play both guard and tackle, but is a contender to start at right guard. Junior **Ricky Henry** sat out last season after transferring from South Dakota State, where he'd started his first two seasons at right guard. Henry has developed a reputation as a fiery competitor, but so far it hasn't directly translated into dominance at a guard position. Jones or Henry need to develop into starting material to provide more depth over the season.

Senior **Derek Meyer** has one season of eligibility left after transferring from Kansas State. He sat out 2008 due to the transfer, but was good enough to start his first five games in Manhattan in 2006 before an injury ended his season.

Senior **Andy Christensen** played in 17 games in 2006 and 2007, starting nine. His 2007 season ended in the third game with a knee injury. He was suspended in early 2008, but made it back on the roster. He did not play last season and is seeking a sixth season of eligibility. If Christensen can return to form, he may be the key to much-needed depth.

Redshirt freshmen **Brandon Thompson**, **Quentin Toailoa**, and **Brian Thorson** will look for playing time in 2009, as will junior **Cruz Barrett**. Of this set, Thompson should be a future starter.

The line must begin the season playing well in order to protect a new starting quarterback and give him confidence in the offense. If they can establish the run game, everything else will become much easier. **MSP**



*If Andy Christensen can return to his 2006 form, the question mark at right guard will be answered.*



# DEFENSIVE LINE

The Husker defensive line has the potential to become one of the best in the Big 12 in 2009, largely because of the play of senior defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh. Suh is the best player at any position for Nebraska coming into the 2009 season, having established himself as such by showing his playmaking abilities in 2008. He stands a chance of becoming Nebraska's first All-American since Josh Bullocks earned the honor in 2003.

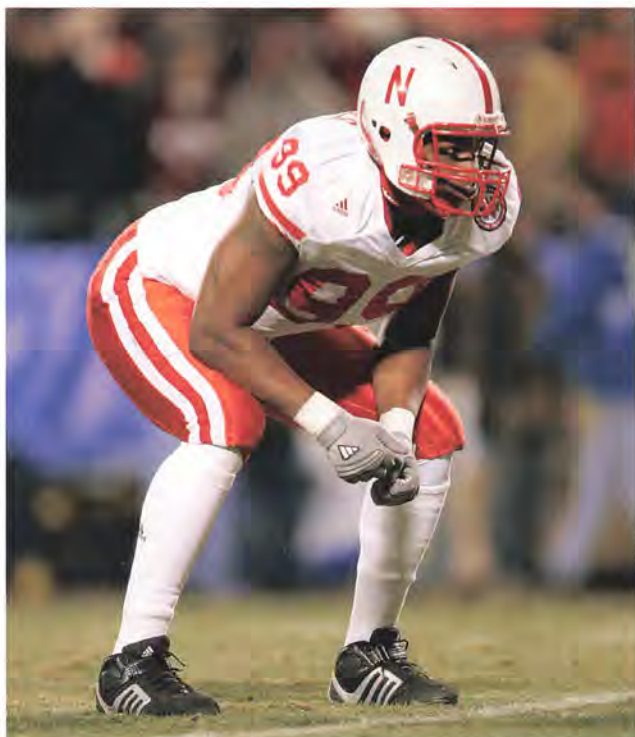
Suh led a resurgence of a defensive line unit that was manhandled during the 2007 season, the result being a defensive breakdown of historic proportions that Husker fans would rather forget. In 2008, the unit played well enough to help the Husker defense finish second in the Big 12 in total defense while

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
95	Allen, Pierre	DE	6-5	265	Jr.
94	Crick, Jared	DT	6-6	285	So.
96	Meredith, Cameron	DE	6-4	260	RFr.
90	Moore, Terrence	DT	6-3	285	So.
55	Steinkuhler, Baker	DT	6-6	295	RFr.
93	Suh, Ndamukong	DT	6-4	300	Sr.
99	Turner, Barry	DE	6-3	265	Sr.
17	Williams, Josh	DE	6-4	245	RFr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

Player	G	UT	Total	TFL-Yds	Sacks-Yds	Int-Yds	Pass Brup
Suh, Ndamukong	13	39	76	19-85	7.5-67	—	1
Allen, Pierre	13	21	52	10-37	5.0-27	2-79	3
Moore, Terrence	7	3	8	2-11	2.0-11	—	—
Turner, Barry	2	1	3	2-15	1.0-14	—	1
Crick, Jared	9	1	2	—	—	—	—
Martin, Ben	1	—	1	—	—	—	—



*Barry Turner missed most of 2008 with a severe leg injury. His return is key to getting pressure on opposing quarterbacks.*

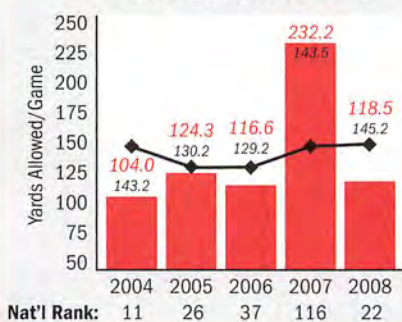
reducing opponents' average yardage by more than 125 yards per game. In 2007, the unit finished with only 13 sacks, in 2008 that total increased to 27.5. The national rank in rushing defense went from 116th to 22nd. The improvement occurred despite having the same starters as in 2007, although under a different coaching staff.

Back to Suh. His emergence wasn't about the fact that he finished the season first on the in total tackles with 76 and had 7.5 sacks, the first time a lineman had led the team in tackles since 1973. It wasn't that Suh was the first Husker defensive lineman with first-team All-Big 12 honors since 1999. It was the big plays he made throughout the season. Suh's two biggest plays were his two interceptions, the first returned for a touchdown against San Jose State early in the season when the Husker defense was trying to define itself. The second interception came against Colorado, a play in which Suh ran over Colorado quarterback Cody Hawkins on his way to the

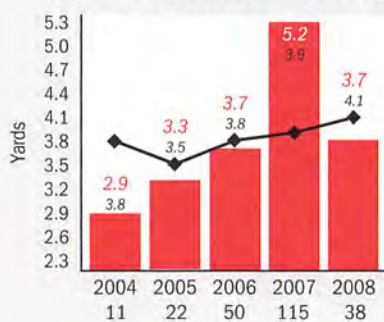
## STATISTICAL TRENDS

■ Nebraska ◆ Big 12 Average

### RUSHING DEFENSE



### YARDS ALLOWED PER CARRY



### SACKS





end zone, treating him like a rag doll in the process. It was a dramatic play that sealed a victory against a hated foe, making Suh an instant hero.

## DEFENSIVE TACKLES

The unit must find someone to complement Suh lest his production be limited by being double-teamed throughout the season. Fellow defensive tackle and 2008 starter **Ty Steinkuhler** is gone, as is Suh's backup, **Shukree Barfield**. Steinkuhler was a steady performer throughout 2008, starting in all 13 games. He finished sixth on the team with 48 tackles, including 21 solo, eight tackles-for-loss, and 2.5 sacks. The most likely player to assume Steinkuhler's role is sophomore and Cozad, NE native **Jared Crick**. Crick saw action in nine games in 2008, finishing with two tackles, but played well enough in spring to move into the starting role.

Fellow sophomore **Terrence Moore** should backup Suh but see heavy playing time in 2009 after having played in seven games last season, garnering eight total tackles and two sacks. Ty's younger brother **Baker Steinkuhler** redshirted his freshman season, but should see plenty of playing time in 2009.

Junior **Ben Martin** adds depth to the defensive tackle position. Martin played in only one game in 2008 and finished with a tackle. Others vying for playing time include redshirt freshmen **Justin Jackson** and **Josh Molek**.

## DEFENSIVE ENDS

At defensive end, the Huskers must find a replacement for Zach Potter. Potter started all 13 games in 2008, finishing seventh in total tackles with 47. He was second in tackles-for-loss with 16, and finished second to Suh in sacks with 5.5. He disrupted opponents' passing, breaking up seven passes at the line of scrimmage, tying a school record at the position. Potter had two interceptions, and three of his deflected passes were intercepted by a fellow defender. He blocked three kicks, tying a season record. Backup Clayton Sievers is also gone this season.

Senior **Barry Turner** is projected to start as long as he is successful in fully recovering from a leg fracture he suffered in the first quarter of the 2008 San Jose State game. Turner had two tackles for a loss and a sack before his injury. Junior **Pierre Allen** did an excellent job of stepping into Barry Turner's vacated position in 2008. Allen played in 11 games, finishing fourth on the team with 52 tackles, including 10 for a loss. He finished behind Suh and Zach Potter with five sacks.

Redshirt freshman **Cameron Meredith** should figure



*Ndamukong Suh and Pierre Allen hope to terrorize opposing quarterbacks in 2009. The two are part of a defensive line unit that should be one of the best in conference.*

heavily into the defensive end rotation in 2009. Meredith played in one game in 2008, but was injured. He retains a year of eligibility as he was granted a medical hardship by the Big 12. Senior **David Harvey** will provide depth and should see the field. Harvey switched to the end position from the interior line during spring. Redshirt freshman **Josh Williams** should add depth and will push for playing time.

The defensive line unit features one sure star along with a mixture of depth and experience. A horrid 2007 season provided incentive for the unit to prove itself in 2008. 2009 is a chance to show it wasn't a fluke. **MSP**

## RECORD BOOK

### QB SACKS, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Trev Alberts	1993	15
	Jim Skow	1985	15
3	Danny Noonan	1986	12
4	Demorrio Williams	2003	11
	Kenny Walker	1990	11
	Broderick Thomas	1986	11
	Danny Noonan	1985	11

### QB SACKS, CAREER

Rank	Player	Years	Total
1	Trev Alberts	1990-93	29.5
2	Grant Wistrom	1994-97	26.5
3	Jim Skow	1983-85	26
	Danny Noonan	1984-86	26
5	Broderick Thomas	1985-88	22.5

### RECENT SACK LEADERS

Player	Year	Total
Ndamukong Suh	2008	7.5
Barry Turner	2007	3
Adam Carriker	2006	7
Adam Carriker	2005	9.5
Benard Thomas	2004	4



# LINEBACKERS

Nebraska started with a traditional three linebacker defensive set in only three games in 2008, preferring to start an extra defensive back in the nickel, or two in the dime most of the season. The change in defensive philosophy is due to the Big 12's movement to the spread offense, which typically features three receivers. Gone are the days in which linebackers were expected to play the run and take on a fullback. Today's linebackers must be able to play in space, whether pursuing from sideline to sideline against the run, or dropping into pass coverage to take on quick receivers.

The sought-after linebacker resembles more of a hybrid between a traditional linebacker and safety. The player must play both roles well as it is difficult to substitute a single role defender without providing a benefit to the offense. If the

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
51	Compton, Will	LB	6-2	220	RFr.
52	Dillard, Phillip	LB	6-1	240	Sr.
42	Fisher, Sean	LB	6-6	230	RFr.
35	Holt, Matt	LB	6-0	200	So.
54	Koehler, Colton	LB	6-1	230	Sr.
40	Lawrence, Blake	LB	6-3	220	Jr.
36	May, Mathew	LB	6-1	210	So.
45	Whaley, Alonzo	LB	6-1	225	RFr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

Player	G	UT	Total	TFL-Yds	Sacks-Yds	Int-Yds	Pass Brup
Dillard, Phillip	9	13	38	2-9	0.5-6	—	1
Lawrence, Blake	10	8	21	—	—	1-0	1
Koehler, Colton	7	7	16	1-2	—	—	—
Holt, Matt	9	11	14	—	—	—	—
May, Mathew	8	5	6	1-9	1.0-8	—	—
Grove, Thomas	13	1	2	—	—	—	—

offense sees a defensive front with two linebackers (4-2), they'll run the ball. If they see three linebackers (4-3), they'll throw. Having players capable of performing as a hybrid linebacker-safety keeps the offense from simply keying on the defensive formation when they're calling plays.

The good news is that the Huskers have plenty of choices from which to find their hybrids.

Things were much different last season. Linebacker coach Mike Ekeler started 2008 with one returning starter at linebacker, Phillip Dillard. Dillard played in all 12 games in 2007, starting two. Tyler Wortman played in nine games in 2007 due to injuries to Bo Ruud and Lance Brandenburgh. The depth chart was so sparse going into the spring of 2008 that Cody Glenn switched positions from running back to linebacker. Glenn's position switch worked out well as at times he played like a man possessed, starting the season with 12 tackles in the Western Michigan game. Even though an unfortunate suspension ended



*After spending his first three seasons as a running back, #34 Cody Glenn converted to linebacker, and played like a man possessed. This season's linebackers will need to find such passion.*

## STATISTICAL TRENDS

### SCORING DEFENSE



### TAKEAWAYS



### YARDS PER DEFENSIVE PLAY





his season after nine games, Glenn ended up fifth in total tackles with 51. He had six tackles-for-loss, four pass breakups, and a forced fumble. Wortman and Glenn are gone this season, but leave the unit open to no less than 10 players who are fighting for playing time at three positions.

Senior **Phillip Dillard** is the most experienced linebacker, having played in 33 games. In 2008, he played in nine games, starting five, but suffered an ankle injury against Baylor and missed the remaining five games. He finished the season with 38 tackles and a half sack. Dillard would be expected to start at middle linebacker in 2009, but his stock dropped dramatically during spring ball as he found himself in Bo Pelini's doghouse. Dillard will have to work hard to win back his starting position despite his experience.

Beyond Dillard, junior **Blake Lawrence** is the most experienced of this year's linebackers. Lawrence played in 10 games in 2008 and started two including the Gator Bowl. He finished 2008 with 21 total tackles and had an interception against Clemson that led to an Alex Henery field goal. Unfortunately Lawrence suffered his third concussion within a year during spring practice, leaving his future in doubt.

Senior **Colton Koehler** started the 2008 season as a relatively unknown walk-on, but played in seven games, eventually replacing Dillard as the starter. Koehler got his first career start in the Gator Bowl and finished the season with 16 tackles, including eight against Kansas State, and a safety against Baylor. Koehler should start at middle linebacker due to his impressive play in the latter part of 2008 and in 2009 spring ball.

Sophomore **Matt Holt** earned his first career start in 2008 against Texas Tech. Originally a safety, he converted to linebacker and played in nine games, finishing with a total of 14 tackles, including eight against Texas Tech. He suffered an injury during the Kansas game and missed the rest of the season due to shoulder surgery. Sophomore **Mathew May** was another walk-on success in 2008, playing in eight games, finishing with six tackles, a sack, a forced fumble, and a fumble recovery. Like Holt, he started his career as a safety and converted to linebacker. May's impressive rise may earn him a start at an outside linebacker position.

Redshirt freshmen **Will Compton**, **Alonzo Whaley**, and **Sean Fisher** are highly-touted newcomers who will compete for



*Blake Lawrence (40) and Colton Koehler (54) made the most of their opportunities in 2008. 2009 will see intense competition for playing time at linebacker.*

a starting role. Compton is widely considered Nebraska's middle linebacker of the future while Whaley and Fisher will compete for the outside linebacker roles. Fisher played in one game as a freshman, but was injured. He retained his year of eligibility as he was granted a medical hardship exemption by the Big 12.

Redshirt freshman **Micah Kreikemeier** and junior

**Thomas Grove** will also compete for playing time. Kreikemeier sat out 2008 with a knee injury while Grove's contributions came on special teams.

The linebacking unit produced only two turnovers in 2008, a number that needs to increase dramatically for the unit to be successful in 2009. Ekeler has a full cupboard this season so the competition for playing time will be fierce. The biggest question is whether or not someone will step up and lead the unit, and if they do, who will it be? **MSP**

## RECORD BOOK

### TOTAL TACKLES, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Barrett Ruud	2003	149
2	Barrett Ruud	2004	143
3	Lee Kunz	1977	141
4	Jerry Murtaugh	1970	132
5	Clete Pillen	1976	129

### TOTAL TACKLES, CAREER

Rank	Player	Years	Total
1	Barrett Ruud	2001-04	432
2	Jerry Murtaugh	1968-70	342
3	Mike Brown	1996-99	287
4	Lee Kunz	1976-79	276
5	Clete Pillen	1974-76	273

### RECENT TACKLE LEADERS

Player	Year	Total
Ndamukong Suh	2008	76
Steve Octavien	2007	92
Stewart Bradley	2006	76
Corey McKeon	2005	98
Barrett Ruud	2004	143



# DEFENSIVE BACKFIELD

The 2008 Husker secondary wasn't as thin as the linebacking unit, but began the season with only two consistent starters: cornerback Armando Murillo and strong safety Larry Asante. Murillo was a consistent performer, starting every game but one the past two seasons. He is the only significant loss from the 2008 secondary, although it should be mentioned Major Culbert left the team in spring.

The scenery changed entering the 2009 season. Eight players—Larry Asante, Rickey Thenarse, Matt O'Hanlon, Eric Hagg, Prince Amukamara, Anthony West, Lance Thorell, and Anthony Blue—gained valuable experience and now have 57 starts between them.

In 2008, the defense opened with the nickel package (five defensive backs) in five games: Western Michigan, San Jose State, New Mexico State, Oklahoma, and Kansas State. In five other games—Missouri, Texas Tech, Baylor, Kansas, and Colorado—the Huskers opened with the dime package (six defensive backs).

Depth is a key for the Huskers as they look to the 2009 season. Like the linebacking unit, competition will be heavy for the starting positions. Considering the high octane offenses of Big 12 opponents, the more prepared the defensive secondary, the better.

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
21	Amukamara, Prince	CB	6-1	200	Jr.
4	Asante, Larry	S	6-1	215	Sr.
14	Blue, Anthony	CB	5-10	185	So.
15	Dennard, Alfonzo	CB	5-10	190	So.
29	Gomes, Dejon	CB	6-0	190	Jr.
28	Hagg, Eric	S	6-2	205	Jr.
33	O'Hanlon, Matt	S	5-11	200	Sr.
12	Osborne, Courtney	S	6-3	185	RFr.
13	Smith, P.J.	S	6-2	205	RFr.
3	Thenarse, Rickey	S	6-0	205	Sr.
23	Thorell, Lance	CB	6-1	195	So.
5	West, Anthony	CB	6-0	205	Jr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

Player	G	UT	Total	TFL-Yds	Sacks-Yds	Int-Yds	Pass Brup
Asante, Larry	13	45	67	2-4	1.0-4	1-0	4
O'Hanlon, Matt	13	33	52	2-5	—	1-21	5
Hagg, Eric	13	29	39	5-28	1.0-16	—	7
Amukamara, Prince	13	21	34	2-12	1.0-11	—	3
West, Anthony	12	23	29	1-2	1.0-2	2-26	9
Thenarse, Rickey	11	17	24	6-25	2.0-21	1-0	1
Thorell, Lance	11	15	24	—	—	—	1
Dennard, Alfonzo	12	4	5	—	—	—	—

## CORNERBACKS

Murillo was the only senior amongst the cornerbacks and the Huskers enter 2009 without a single senior at the position. Juniors **Prince Amukamara** and **Anthony West** come into the season with 14 starts between them. Amukamara played in all 13 games in 2008, starting against Western Michigan, New Mexico State, and Virginia Tech. He finished with 34 tackles and forced two fumbles, but more importantly, improved his play and grew into the position by the end of the season. West started 11 games in 2008, missing one due to injury. He finished with 29 tackles, a sack, and two interceptions. He tied for first in pass

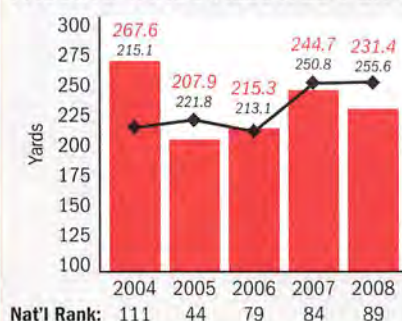
breakups with Murillo with nine. He will be expected to be a steady starter in 2009.

Sophomore **Anthony Blue** sat out the 2008 season recovering from an ACL injury. Blue started two games as a true freshman in 2007, and played well enough to be awarded first-team Freshman All-Conference by the *Sporting News*. If he has fully recovered his speed and agility, Blue is a key component to the secondary in 2009.

Sophomore walk-on **Lance Thorell** found playing time as the starting dime back in 2008. He played in 11 games, including five starts and finished with 24 tackles. Sophomore

## STATISTICAL TRENDS

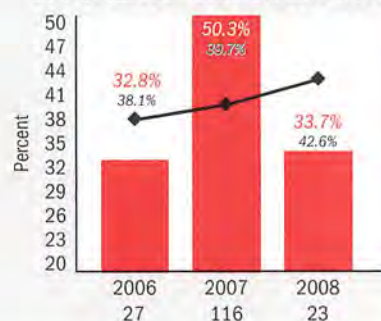
### PASSING YARDS ALLOWED PER GAME



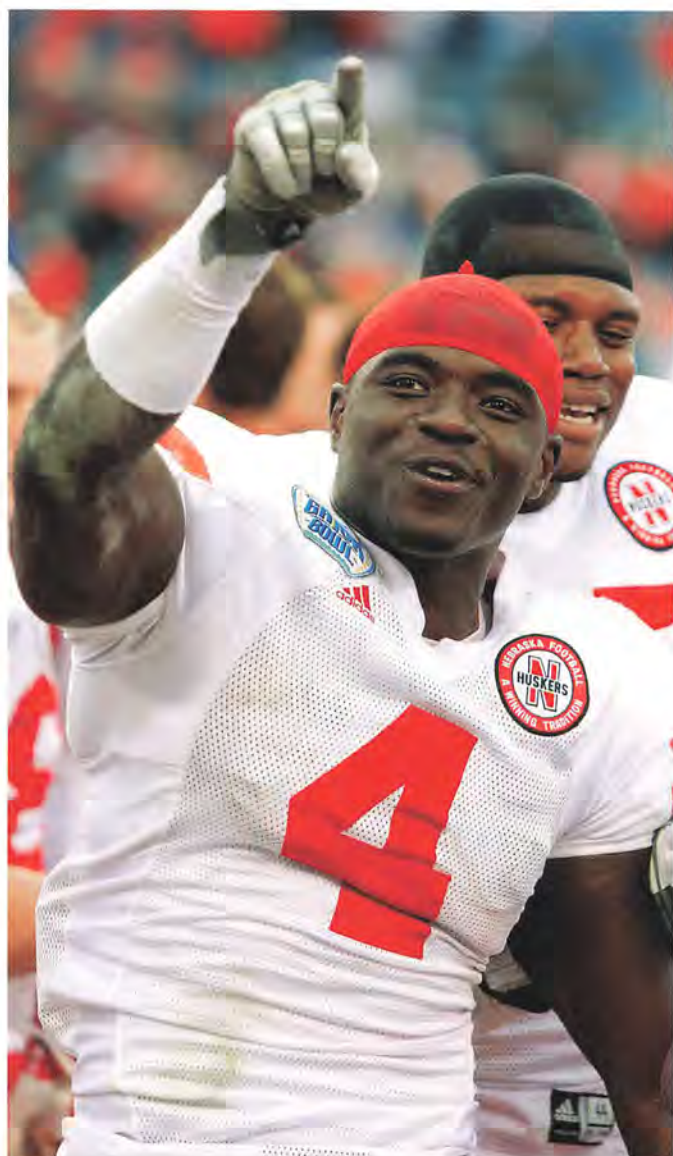
### PASS EFFICIENCY AGAINST



### OPPONENTS' 3RD DOWN CONV.







*Strong safety Larry Asante returns as the leader of the defensive secondary.*

Alfonzo Dennard was one of only three true freshman who played in 2008, playing in 12 games and pulling double duty as a kick returner. Junior **Dejon Gomes** is a JUCO transfer from City College of San Francisco who has joined the team early for 2009 spring practice. He has three years to use two seasons of eligibility.

## SAFETIES

Strong safety senior **Larry Asante** is the most experienced returner in the secondary with 22 starts over the past two seasons. Asante finished second in total tackles in 2008 with 67 and had two tackles-for-loss, a sack, four pass breakups, and an interception. Asante gained Big 12 honors, making the honorable mention list.

Fellow seniors **Matt O'Hanlon** and **Rickey Thenarse** split time in 2008 starting at free safety with nine and five starts respectively. O'Hanlon began his Nebraska career as a walk-on, but was awarded a scholarship in 2008. He finished third in tackles with 52, including 33 solos. He had two tackles-for-loss, five pass break ups, and an interception. Thenarse started against Missouri, but battled injuries early in 2008 and then took over the starting free safety role from O'Hanlon for the last four games of the season. He finished with 24 tackles, six tackles-for-loss, and two sacks. His best game came against Colorado when he recorded eight tackles, two for loss, and a sack. Thenarse remains a fan favorite on special teams where he blocked a punt against Clemson.

Junior **Eric Hagg** played in all 13 games in 2008, with 10 starts as the nickel back, and finished with 39 tackles. Hagg made a name for himself in the Gator Bowl against Clemson, breaking up a pass when the Tigers had a first-and-goal, then sacking Clemson quarterback Cullen Harper for a 16-yard loss on the next play to help preserve the victory. Due to the depth at cornerback, Hagg switched to safety.

**Courtney Osborne** and **P.J. Smith** made strong impressions during spring ball. They will compete along with fellow redshirt freshmen **Jase Dean** and **Justin Blatchford** for playing time. Sophomore **Mason Wald** played on special teams as a true freshman in 2008 and will battle for playing time at safety in 2009. Known for his hard-hitting play, Wald had six tackles, four solos.

The defensive secondary produced six interceptions and four forced fumbles as Nebraska finished 97th in turnovers gained in 2008. Much more will be expected from the defense this season, and, like the linebacking unit, the defensive secondary must produce more turnovers in 2009 to be successful. **MSP**

## RECORD BOOK

### INTERCEPTIONS, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Josh Bullocks	2003	10
2	Bill Kosch	1970	7
3	Dana Stephenson	1969	7
	Larry Wachholtz	1966	7
5	Kenny Wilhite	1991	6
	Dave Mason	1971	6

### INTERCEPTIONS, CAREER

Rank	Player	Years	Total
1	Dana Stephenson	1967-69	14
2	Josh Bullocks	2002-04	13
3	Bret Clark	1982-84	12
4	5 tied		11

### RECENT INTERCEPTION LEADERS

Player	Year	Total
3 tied	2008	2
Grixby & Ruud	2007	2
Andrew Shanle	2006	4
Corey McKeon	2005	3
Daniel Bullocks	2004	5



# SPECIAL TEAMS

At first glance, the Huskers appear to be in fine shape in the special teams area. The kicking game is in excellent shape as **Alex Henery** returns as one of the most accurate kickers in the nation. Henery made 18-21 field goals and 56-57 PATs last season. Henery further solidifies his high ranking position when you consider he was 3-4 from 30-39 yards and 6-6 from 40-49 yards. Henery is 26-29 for his career in field goals, for an 89.7% accuracy rate, which to this point is smashing the previous school record of 75%.

Henery's biggest feat of the 2008 season was his 57-yard, school-record field goal against Colorado, made even more dramatic considering his previous long was 48. He finished the Colorado game 4-4 and accomplished the same feat in the Gator Bowl victory over Clemson. In the Western Michigan game, his four field goals were all from 44 yards.

Fellow kicker **Adi Kunalic** returns in 2009. Kunalic will handle kickoff duties again this season after garnering touchbacks on 28 of 81 attempts in 2008, good enough for the Huskers to finish fifth nationally.

Unfortunately, two important components from the kicking game are gone in 2009. Long snapper T.J. O'Leary is gone after handling those duties for the past three seasons. Holder Jake Wesch is also gone after handling holding duties for the past three years. Sam Meginnis or newcomer P.J. Mangieri will handle long snapping duties this season.

Both punters must be replaced from last season. Dan Tichtener handled most of the duties, while Jake Wesch punted

for three games. Alex Henery may pull double duty and do the punting in 2009, but sophomore **Jon Damkroger** and redshirt freshman **Brett Maher** should get their shot.

Nate Swift was the primary punt returner last season, finishing 18th nationally. **Niles Paul** showed potential in 2008, but must become more consistent, and receivers **Antonio Bell** and **Tim Marlowe** should get a chance to show what they can do.

## 2009 ROSTER

No.	Player	Position	HT	WT	Year
27	Damkroger, Jon	P/PK	6-1	185	So.
90	Henery, Alex	PK	6-2	175	Jr.
20	Kunalic, Adi	PK	6-0	190	Jr.
96	Maher, Brett	P/PK	6-0	170	RFr.

## STATISTICS FOR RETURNING PLAYERS

PLACEKICKING	FGM-FGA	Pct	0-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Long
Henery, Alex	18-21	85.7	1-1	7-7	3-4	6-6	1-3	57



*Alfonzo Dennard was one of only three true freshman to see action in 2008, and averaged 19 yards in his kick return duties.*

Paul and Alfonzo Dennard return after handling nearly all the kickoff return duties in 2008. Paul handled the majority of the returns and finished with a 23.6 average, with six returns over 30 yards. Two of the five longest plays by the Huskers last season were Paul kick returns, including the longest play of the season, an 85-yard touchdown against San Jose State that broke open the game. Dennard's speed assures he'll assume these duties again this season.

Kickoff coverage was the weakest part of special teams as Nebraska finished a dismal 105th nationally in kickoff coverage. Against Oklahoma, the unit gave up returns of 62, 57, and 40 yards, while the longest play all season against the Huskers came when KSU's Brandon Banks returned a kick 98 yards for a touchdown. Clearly this is an area that must improve this season as the defense would best be served by pinning opponent deep in their own territory. **MSP**

## RECORD BOOK

### FIELD GOALS MADE, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Total
1	Jordan Congdon	2005	19
2	Kris Brown	1997	18
	Alex Henery	2008	18

### PUNTING AVERAGE, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Yards
1	Sam Koch	2005	46.5
2	Kyle Larson	2003	45.1
3	Dan Hadenfeldt	1999	45.0
4	Bill Lafleur	1998	44.9
5	Jesse Kosch	1996	44.7

### PUNT RETURN YARDS PER ATTEMPT, SEASON

Rank	Player	Year	Yards
1	Pat Fischer	1960	21.2
2	Bobby Newcombe	1997	20.3
3	Rod Smith	1986	18.9
4	Bobby Newcombe	1999	18.4
5	Terrence Nunn	2005	18.3



The 2008 Nebraska coaching staff returns intact in 2009. **Mark "Bo" Pelini** enters his second full year as head coach after joining Bob Devaney, Tom Osborne, and Frank Solich as coaches who won bowl games in their first year as Nebraska's head man. His challenge in 2009 is making sure the Huskers move forward in their rise to prominence.

**Shawn Watson** enters his fourth season at Nebraska and third as the Huskers offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach. Watson's offenses have finished among the top in the nation during his first two years as offensive coordinator. His coaching prowess will be tested this season as he breaks in a new quarterback with an unproven receiving corps.

Running backs coach **Tim Beck** is back for his second season, having served at Kansas as a receivers coach for three seasons previous to his Nebraska stint. Tight ends coach **Ron Brown** will enter his 19th year as a Husker assistant after serving 17 years under Tom Osborne. Brown returns his top three tight ends from 2008.

2009 will be **Ted Gilmore's** fifth year on staff, with four as receivers coach, three as recruiting coordinator, and the last two as an associate head coach under Bo Pelini. Gilmore has his work cut out for him as he tries to find dependable replacements for Nate Swift and Todd Peterson.

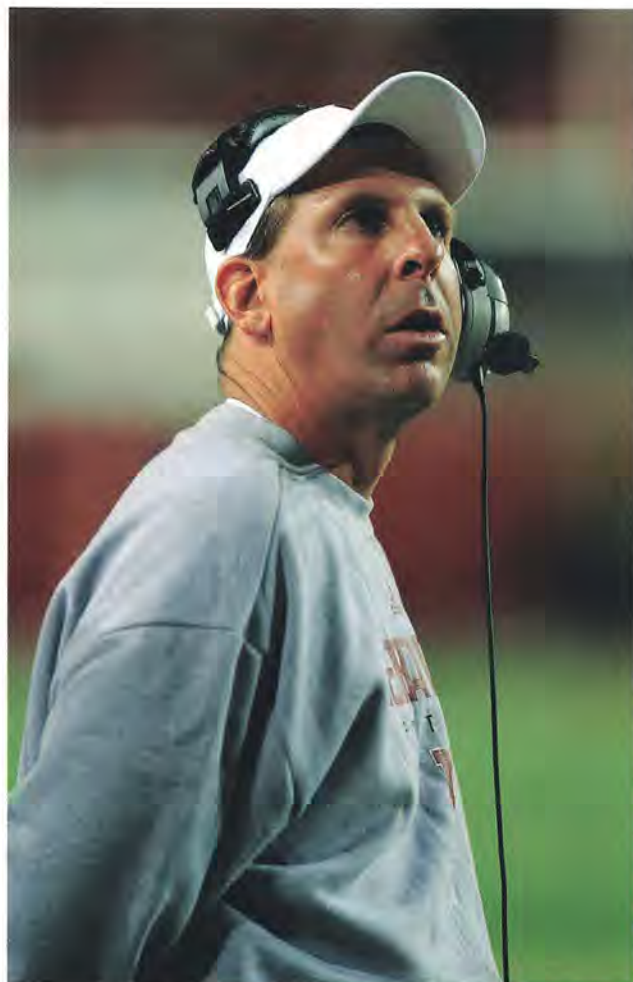
**Barney Cotton** serves as associate head coach and offensive line coach. He is in his second season under Pelini, having served a season under Frank Solich in 2003 as offensive coordinator and offensive line coach. Cotton's challenge is finding depth amongst the younger players this season.

The defense is lead by **Carl Pelini** who returns for his second season as defensive coordinator and defensive line coach. This season he has the opportunity to coach his first All-American candidate in Ndamukong Suh.

**Mike Ekeler** returns for his second season as

## Bo Pelini College Coaching History

Year	School	Position	Record	Result
2003	Nebraska	Defensive Coordinator	10-3	Alamo Bowl Win Over Michigan
2004	Oklahoma	Co-Defensive Coordinator	12-1	Lost National Title Game to USC 55-19
2005	LSU	Defensive Coordinator	11-2	Won Peach Bowl
2006	LSU	Defensive Coordinator	11-2	Won Sugar Bowl
2007	LSU	Defensive Coordinator	12-2	Won National Title
2008	Nebraska	Head Coach	9-4	Won Gator Bowl



*Husker Head Coach Bo Pelini's first season went well. Can he keep Nebraska moving forward in his second season?*

Nebraska linebackers coach, but his fifth straight year with Bo Pelini as he spent 2005-07 at LSU, and 2004 at Oklahoma. Ekeler interviewed at South Florida and was thought to be a leading candidate to replace defensive coordinator Wally Burnham, but the job went to Cincinnati's former coordinator Joe Tresey. Ekeler should be considered a rising star who's bound for greater heights.

John Papuchis is in his second year coaching defensive ends and assists with special teams coaching. Papuchis's challenge is to develop the young defensive ends into rising stars.

Marvin Sanders enters his second season as defensive secondary coach. Sanders was with Pelini previously in 2003 under Frank Solich and played at Nebraska as a defensive back from 1987-89 under Tom Osborne. Sanders should have more depth to work with and improve on last year's pass defense, which was ranked 89th nationally.

Support staff includes Assistant Athletic Director for Football Operations **Jeff Jamrog** and **James Dobson** as the head football strength coach. **MSP**



# 2009 NUMERICAL ROSTER

No.	Name	Pos	Ht	Wt	Year	Hometown (Previous School)
1	Brooks, Chris	WR	6-2	215	Sr.	St. Louis, Mo. (Hazelwood East)
2	Bell, Antonio	WR	6-2	180	Fr.	Daytona Beach, Fla. (Mainland)
3	Lee, Zac	QB	6-2	210	Jr.	San Francisco, Calif. (San Francisco City College)
3	Thenarise, Rickey	S	6-0	205	Sr.	Los Angeles, Calif. (Jordan)
4	Asante, Larry	S	6-1	215	Sr.	Alexandria, Va. (Coffeyville Community College)
5	West, Anthony	CB	6-0	205	Jr.	San Diego, Calif. (Point Loma)
6	Cooper, Khiry	WR	6-2	195	RFr.	Shreveport, La. (Calvary Baptist Academy)
7	Spano, Kody	QB	6-2	215	RFr.	Stephenville, Texas (Stephenville)
7	Washington, Lalravis	QB	6-3	225	Jr.	Bradenton, Fla. (Bayshore)
8	Cassidy, Austin	S	6-1	210	So.	Lincoln, Neb. (Southwest)
8	Henry, Will	WR	6-5	215	Jr.	El Paso, Texas (J.M. Hanks)
9	Lester, Ben	WR	5-10	170	So.	Tecumseh, Neb. (Tecumseh)
10	Helu Jr., Roy	IB	6-0	215	Jr.	Danville, Calif. (San Ramon Valley)
11	Gilleylen, Curenski	WR	6-0	220	So.	Leander, Texas (Leander)
12	Osborne, Courtney	S	6-3	185	RFr.	Garland, Texas (South Garland)
13	Smith, P.J.	S	6-2	205	RFr.	River Ridge, La. (John Curtis)
14	Blue, Anthony	CB	5-10	185	So.	Cedar Hill, Texas, (Cedar Hill)
14	Ward, Lester	IB	6-3	215	RFr.	Brenham, Texas
15	Dennard, Alfonso	CB	5-10	190	So.	Rochelle, Ga. (Wilcox County)
16	Ebke, Jim	S	6-0	215	So.	Lincoln, Neb. (South Dakota State) (East)
16	Dostal, John	WR	5-9	175	Fr.	Papillion, NE (Omaha Gross)
17	Williams, Josh	DE	6-4	245	RFr.	Denton, Texas (Ryan)
17	Green, Cody	QB	6-4	215	Fr.	Dayton, Texas (Dayton)
18	Holt, Menelik	WR	6-4	220	Sr.	San Diego, Calif. (St. Augustine)
19	Castille, Quentin	IB	6-1	235	Jr.	La Porte, Texas (La Porte)
20	Dean, Jase	CB	6-0	185	RFr.	Bridgeport, Neb.
20	Kunalic, Adi	PK	6-0	190	Jr.	Fort Worth, Texas (North Crowley)
21	Amukamara, Prince	CB	6-1	200	Jr.	Glendale, Ariz. (Apollo)
21	Marlowe, Tim	WR	5-10	175	RFr.	Youngstown, Ohio (Cardinal Mooney)
22	Wald, Mason	S	5-11	195	So.	Birmingham, Ala. (Vestavia Hills)
23	Thorrell, Lance	CB	6-1	195	So.	Loomis, Neb. (Loomis)
24	Paul, Niles	WR	6-1	215	Jr.	Omaha, Neb. (Omaha North)
24	Watson, Adam	WR	6-0	195	Jr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Niwat (Colo.))
25	Wallace, Jeremy	RB	6-1	235	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Bryan)
25	Reed, Kyler	TE	6-3	225	RFr.	Shawnee, Kan. (St. Thomas Aquinas)
26	Osborne, Steven	WR	6-4	195	RFr.	Garland, Texas (South Garland)
27	Damkroger, Jon	P/PK	6-1	185	So.	Firth, Neb. (Norris)
28	Jones, Austin	IB	5-10	210	So.	Centennial, Colo. (Smokey Hill)
28	Hagg, Eric	S	6-2	205	Jr.	Peoria, Ariz. (Ironwood)
29	Gomes, Dejon	CB	6-0	190	Jr.	Hayward, Calif. (City College of San Francisco)
29	Okafor, Collins	IB	6-1	225	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Westside)
30	Hays, Mike	FB	6-1	240	So.	Papillion, Neb. (Papillion-LaVista)
32	Mendoza, Marcus	WR	5-10	185	So.	Houston, Texas (Spring Woods)
33	O'Hanlon, Matt	S	5-11	200	Sr.	Bellevue, Neb. (Bellevue East)
35	Holt, Matt	LB	6-0	200	So.	Lee's Summit, Mo. (West)
35	Makovicka, Jordan	RB	5-10	195	RFr.	Ulysses, Neb. (East Butler)
36	Mak, Mathew	LB	6-1	210	So.	Imperial, Neb. (Chase County)
37	Thomsen, Kevin	FB	6-2	235	So.	Elkhorn, Neb. (Elkhorn)
39	Blatchford, Justin	CB	6-1	195	RFr.	Ponca, Neb.
40	Lawrence, Blake	LB	6-3	220	Jr.	Shawnee Mission, Kan. (Shawnee Mission West)
41	Grove, Thomas	LB	6-2	225	Jr.	Arlington, Neb. (Arlington)
42	Camarata, Joseph	LB	5-10	225	So.	Overland Park, Kan.
42	Fisher, Sean	LB	6-6	230	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard North)
43	Moravec, Brent	S	6-0	185	RFr.	Grand Island, Neb. (Central Catholic)
44	Kreikemeier, Micah	LB	6-3	215	RFr.	West Point, Neb. (Central Catholic)
44	McNeill, Mike	TE	6-4	240	Jr.	Kirkwood, Mo. (Kirkwood)
45	Makovicka, Justin	FB	6-1	230	Jr.	Ulysses, Neb. (East Butler)
45	Whaley, Alonzo	LB	6-1	225	RFr.	Madisonville, Texas
46	Dixon, Taylor	WR	5-11	190	RFr.	Wauneta, Neb. (Wauneta-Palisade)
47	Yancy, William	DE	6-4	245	So.	Glendale, Ariz. (Ironwood)
48	Legate, Tyler	FB	5-10	225	So.	Neligh, Neb. (Neligh-Oakdale)
49	Young, Dreu	TE	6-4	245	Jr.	Cozad, Neb. (Cozad)
50	Toailoa, Quentin	OL	6-4	300	RFr.	Highland, Calif. (Redlands East Valley)
51	Compton, Will	LB	6-2	220	RFr.	Bonne Terre, Mo. (North County)
52	Dillard, Phillip	LB	6-1	240	Sr.	Tulsa, Okla. (Jenks)
54	Koehler, Cotton	LB	6-1	230	Sr.	Harvard, Neb. (Nebraska Wesleyan) (Harvard)
54	McShane, Max	OL	6-6	305	So.	Elkhorn, Neb.
55	Steinkuhler, Baker	DT	6-6	295	RFr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Southwest)
58	Jackson, Justin	DT	6-3	270	RFr.	Roca, Neb. (Norris)
58	Caputo, Mike	C	6-1	275	So.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard North)
59	Thorson, Brian	OL	6-3	290	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard North)
61	Manninger, Matt	LB	6-1	220	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Creighton Prep)

62	Christensen, Andy	G	6-3	310	Sr.	Bennington, Neb. (Bennington)
63	Marlin, Ben	DT	6-4	260	Jr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Southwest)
63	Meyer, Derek	T	6-5	315	Sr.	Campbell, Neb. (Kansas State) (Silver Lake)
65	McDermott, Colin	DE	6-2	240	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Creighton Prep)
65	Smith, Mike	T	6-6	290	Jr.	Las Vegas, Nev. (Palo Verde)
66	McDermott, Conor	DE	6-2	240	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Creighton Prep)
66	Barrett, Cruz	G/T	6-4	310	Jr.	Daytona Beach, Fla. (Mainland)
67	Meginnis, Sam	LS	6-2	220	RFr.	Lincoln, Neb. (East)
67	Hickman, Jacob	C	6-4	295	Sr.	Bakersfield, Calif. (Centennial)
68	Molek, Josh	DT	6-3	245	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Skull Catholic)
68	Williams, Keith	G	6-5	320	Jr.	Florissant, Mo. (McClure North)
70	Anderson, Kenny	DE	6-2	240	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard West)
71	Stoddard, Graham	LB	6-2	225	RFr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Southwest)
72	Burkes, Jaivorio	T	6-5	295	Jr.	Phoenix, Ariz. (Moon Valley)
73	Jones, D.J.	G	6-5	315	Jr.	Omaha, Neb. (Central)
74	Henry, Ricky	G	6-4	300	Jr.	Omaha, Neb. (North Dakota State College of Science)
75	Lingenfelter, Luke	OL	6-4	255	So.	Plainview, Neb. (Plainview)
77	Choi, Seung Hoon	OL	6-2	295	RFr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Christian)
78	Jones, Marcel	T	6-7	310	So.	Phoenix, Ariz. (Trevor Browne)
79	Thompson, Brandon	OL	6-6	300	RFr.	The Woodlands, Texas
80	Harvey, David	DE	6-4	275	Sr.	La Plata, Md. (McDonough)
80	Hill, Ryan	TE	6-3	250	So.	Arvada, Colo. (Arvada West)
81	Coffon, Ben	TE	6-6	240	RFr.	Ames, Iowa
82	Cammack, Wes	WR	5-11	200	Sr.	DeWitt, Neb. (Tri County)
83	Bechhold, Damon	TE	6-4	235	RFr.	Omaha, Neb. (Westside)
85	Klingelhoef, Faron	DT	6-2	255	So.	Amherst, Neb.
85	Hyland, KC	WR	6-6	205	RFr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Pius X)
86	McClure, Mychael	TE	6-5	235	RFr.	Wisner, Neb. (Wisner-Pilger)
88	Marlin, Jay	TE	6-2	225	So.	Waverly, Neb. (Waverly)
90	Moore, Terrence	DT	6-3	285	So.	New Orleans, La. (McDonogh 35)
90	Henery, Alex	PK	6-2	175	Jr.	Omaha, Neb. (Burke)
91	Glassman, Dan	DE	6-4	250	Jr.	Omaha, Neb. (Creighton Prep)
92	Fahie, Tyrone	DE	6-3	255	Jr.	Virginia Beach, Va. (U.S. Navy) (Ocean Lakes)
93	Suh, Ndamukong	DT	6-4	300	Sr.	Portland, Ore. (Grant)
94	Crick, Jared	DT	6-6	285	So.	Cozad, Neb. (Cozad)
95	Allen, Pierre	DE	6-5	265	Jr.	Denver, Colo. (Thomas Jefferson)
96	Meredith, Cameron	DE	6-4	260	RFr.	Santa Ana, Calif. (Mater Dei)
96	Maher, Brett	P/PK	6-0	170	RFr.	Kearney, Neb.
99	Turner, Barry	DE	6-3	265	Sr.	Antioch, Tenn. (Brentwood Academy)
	Ankrah, Jason	DE	6-4	250	Fr.	Galithersburg, Md. (Quince Orchard)
	Ash, Nick	OL	6-5	260	Fr.	Keller, Texas (Keller)
	Barry, Robert	LB	6-8	220	Fr.	Battle Creek, Neb. (Battle Creek)
	Burkhead, Rex	RB	5-11	200	Fr.	Plano, Texas (Plano)
	Chapek, Brandon	OL	6-5	320	Fr.	Wahoo, Neb. (Bishop Neumann)
	Clark, Tyson	WR	6-4	185	Fr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Lincoln East)
	Coffey, Jesse	OL	6-7	290	Fr.	Denton, Texas (Guyer)
	Failla, Nick	WR	5-10	180	Fr.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard North)
	Green, Andrew	DB	6-0	180	Fr.	San Antonio, Texas (Madison)
	Jones, Dwight	OL	6-4	240	Fr.	Gretna, Neb. (Gretna)
	Kanne, Colin	DL	6-4	260	Fr.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard West)
	Kellogg Jr., Ron	QB	6-1	210	Fr.	Omaha, Neb. (Omaha Westside)
	Kerr, J.T.	TE	6-4	230	Fr.	San Diego, Calif. (Scripps Ranch)
	Kildow, Ty	WR	5-7	165	Fr.	Omaha, Neb. (Millard South)
	Kinnie, Brandon	WR	6-3	215	So.	Kansas City, Mo. (Fort Scott (Kan.) CC)
	Kuhl, Adam	LS	6-2	255	Fr.	Maple Valley, Iowa (Maple Valley Community)
	Long, Jake	TE	6-4	230	Fr.	Elkhorn, Neb. (Elkhorn)
	Long, Spencer	DE	6-4	250	Fr.	Elkhorn, Neb. (Elkhorn)
	Mangieri, P.J.	LS	6-4	245	Fr.	Peoria, Ill. (Dunlap)
	Marlin, Eric	LB	6-2	215	Fr.	Moreno Valley, Calif. (Rancho Verde)
	Martinez, Taylor	ATH	6-1	185	Fr.	Corona, Calif. (Centennial)
	Middleton, Lazarri	DB	6-1	190	Fr.	Long Beach, Calif. (Polytechnic)
	Nickens, Brodrick	OL	6-5	285	Fr.	Alliance, Neb. (Alliance)
	Paulsen, Devin	LB	6-2	210	Fr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Lincoln Christian)
	Pensick, Cole	DT	6-2	260	Fr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Lincoln Northeast)
	Qvale, Brent	OL	6-7	335	Fr.	Williston, N.D. (Williston)
	Randle, Thaddeus	DT	6-1	255	Fr.	Galena Park, Texas (North Shore)
	Robinson, Dontrayevous	RB	6-1	215	Fr.	Eufless, Texas (Eufless Trinity)
	Sirles, Jeremiah	OL	6-6	280	Fr.	Lakewood, Colo. (Bear Creek)
	Starkebaum, Colby	LB	6-1	215	Fr.	Sterling, Colo. (Sterling)
	Washington, Dijon	DB	6-0	175	Fr.	Lawndale, Calif. (Leuzinger)
	Wells, Brett	TE	6-4	200	Fr.	St. Paul, Neb. (St. Paul)
	Williams, Chris	LB	6-0	230	Fr.	Abilene, Texas (Abilene)
	Zimmerer, C.J.	RB	6-0	215	Fr.	Omaha, Neb. (Omaha Gross)





# KNOW YOUR ENEMY

## Cornhuskers 2009 Schedule Analysis

by Jon Johnston

**W**hile 2008 was a year to break in a new coaching staff and regain lost ground, 2009 represents an opportunity for the Huskers to capture the Big 12 North. It may be a bit early to set such expectations, but even with a new quarterback the goal doesn't seem out of reach given the current status of the North.

The schedule sets up nicely, starting against two Sun Belt Conference foes at home. Florida Atlantic could be dangerous, but that provides an onus to start the season ready to play.

Traveling to Blacksburg to face a rising Hokie team represents a huge challenge for a team that will be looking for an offensive identity. The good news is there's a great deal of upside in playing the Hokies on the road; a loss doesn't damage the overall goal for the year while a win could launch the Huskers onto the national stage.

Last year the Huskers opened conference play on the road against two of the most explosive offenses in the nation, a tough task considering the defense was learning a new system. This year things are different as the Tigers and Red Raiders must replace their quarterbacks and explosive playmakers. Given that, the Huskers have a shot at opening Big 12 play at 2-0 and in much better shape than the 0-2 conference start from a year ago. Throw in a win against Iowa State and a 3-0 start would be most welcome.

Baylor will be more of a threat than most expect while Oklahoma must be considered a measuring stick game once again. The key games come late in the season as the Huskers must travel to Lawrence and Boulder to face teams that should contend for the Big 12 North crown.

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# FLORIDA ATLANTIC

SEPTEMBER 5  
LINCOLN, NE

It won't be the football team that's foremost on the minds of Husker fans when the Florida Atlantic Owls come to Lincoln for the season opener and first ever meeting between the schools. It'll be their enigmatic coach, Howard Schnellenberger. Schnellenberger is forever etched into Husker history because of that night in Miami when Tom Osborne went for two in the 1984 Orange Bowl. Schnellenberger's Miami Hurricanes upset our beloved Huskers 31-30 as he grabbed his only national title.

Schnellenberger will be forever attached to the Florida Atlantic Owls as well, having built their program from scratch. The Owls first recruiting class came in 1999 and they played their first football game on September 1, 2001. They moved to FBS (then Div-1A) in 2004, joining the Sun Belt Conference in 2005. The Owls' rise has been meteoric. They are the fastest start-up team to earn an FBS victory, the fastest to be invited to a bowl game, and the first Sun Belt Conference team to win back-to-back bowl games. A big hurdle remains, however as the Owls have never beaten a BCS school on the road.

2007 saw the Owls win the Sun Belt Conference title, with Schnellenberger taking conference Coach of the Year and quarterback Rusty Smith winning conference Player of the Year honors. 2008 saw the Owls take a step back, finishing in a tie for third in conference. After

starting 1-5, they won five of their last six games, including a win over Central Michigan in the Motor City Bowl. The Owls entered 2009 spring practice admitting they became complacent after their 2007 conference win and are determined to not let it to happen again.

Offensively, the Owls return senior quarterback and team leader Smith who owns FAU's records for passing attempts, completions, yards, and touchdowns. Top receiver Cortez Gent returns, along with tight ends Jason Harmon, who sat out 2008 with an ACL injury, and Jamari Grant. The Owls must find a replacement at running back as the projected starter, Jeff Blanchard suffered a knee injury during spring practice and will be gone for much (if not all) of 2009.

The Owls are replacing most of their defensive front seven, but they haven't been particularly adept at stopping the run in recent years, anyway. Their national rank for rush defense for past four years: 115th, 97th, 80th, and 99th. The secondary is experienced and capable of generating turnovers.

A weak defensive front seven means the Huskers can establish a running game, control the clock, and let the new starting quarterback grow into the passing game. However, a seasoned quarterback and wide receiving corps means the Husker defensive secondary will be tested. If they're not up to the task, the Owls could cause some heart attacks. **MSP**



*Florida Atlantic's 2008 bowl win over Central Michigan put coach Howard Schnellenberger at a perfect 6-0 in bowl games.*

## Owls At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 7-6 (Sun Belt: 4-3; T-3rd) Won Motor City Bowl

**Last Five Years:** 31-30 (16-12 Sun Belt)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-2

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 1-4

**Coach:** Howard Schnellenberger, 48-48 in 8 years at Florida Atlantic

**Last Year vs. Florida Atlantic:** N/A

**All-Time vs. Florida Atlantic:** 1st Meeting

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 25.1 (T-62)
- Total Yards/Game: 393.5 (42)
- Rush Yards/Game: 138.8 (67)
- Pass Efficiency: 125.5 (60)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 28.7 (82)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 400.4 (93)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 179.1 (99)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 136.8 (90)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: -9 (T-101)
- Time of Possession: 27:39.77 (108)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 70.4 (T-113)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Rusty Smith:** Holds FAU records for passing attempts, completions, yards, total yards, and touchdowns.

**Cortez Gent:** Top returning receiver with 60 receptions for 935 yards in 2008. Last season ranked 19th nationally in receiving yards.

**Tavious Polo:** Holds FAU record for interceptions in a season (7), dual duties as punt returner.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Huskers should be able to run at will, defensive line should get some sacks.
- The worst case scenario is another Schnellenberger upset, a first BCS road win for the Owls, and Husker fans hearing about it every time his name comes up.



# ARKANSAS STATE

SEPTEMBER 12  
LINCOLN, NE

Arkansas State comes to Lincoln for the first-ever meeting with Nebraska as the second of three Sun Belt Conference teams the Huskers will face in 2009. Playing football since 1931 as the Indians, Arkansas State officially changed their name to the "Red Wolves," unveiling the new name in March 2008.

Arkansas State had seen success in football at the FCS level, making the playoffs four years in a row, 1984-87, with their best year in 1986 when they finished as national runner-up. They started playing at the FBS level in 1992, but have managed only one winning season since. Steve Roberts has managed to take the program to new heights since becoming head coach in late 2001, although the Red Wolves have yet to finish above .500 in the 2000s. They have finished 6-6 three times, so it's fitting their conference record over nearly the same time span is at .500 (27-27). They won the conference title in 2005 and were invited to the New Orleans Bowl, losing to Southern Miss, 31-19.

2008 started off well enough, with the Red Wolves winning four of their first six games, including an 18-14 upset at Texas A&M, breaking a streak of 20 straight home opening wins for the Aggies, and only their fourth defeat in 50 non-conference games at College Station. Unfortunately,



*Arkansas State Head Coach Steve Roberts has been building the Red Wolves' program since he arrived in late 2001. 2009 should be his best team yet.*

the Red Wolves lost four of their last six games to end the season uninvited to a bowl and 6-6 (again).

Arkansas State enters 2009 looking to challenge Troy for the Sun Belt Conference title. They return 17 starters, six on offense, and eight on defense. On offense, the Red Wolves are balanced, averaging just over 200 rushing and just under 200 passing yards in 2008. Senior quarterback Corey Leonard returns along with running backs Reggie Arnold (senior) and Derek Lawson (sophomore). Leonard and Lawson represent the Sun

Belt's best tandem, rushing for over 1,700 yards combined last season, while Arnold has had three straight seasons with at least 1,000 yards rushing. Kicker Josh Arauco was a Lou Groza Award finalist in 2008, making 17-20 field goals and setting a school record with 15 straight.

Arkansas State finished 2008 as the top rushing defense in the Sun Belt, tops in turnover margin, and second in pass defense. The Red Wolves are led by 2008 Sun Belt Defensive Player of the Year Alex Carrington, a senior defensive end who is also an NFL prospect.

The Red Wolves provide a decent non-conference challenge (as decent as the Sun Belt can provide), and unlike Florida Atlantic, have beaten a BCS school on the road. **MSP**

## Red Wolves At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 6-6 (Sun Belt: 4-3; T-3rd)  
**Last Five Years:** 26-33 (19-16 Sun Belt)  
**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-1  
**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 1-3  
**Coach:** Steve Roberts, 37-47 in 7 years at Arkansas State  
**Last Year vs. Arkansas State:** N/A  
**All-Time vs. Arkansas State:** 2009 will be first meeting

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

**Offense**

- Points/Game: 27.0 (52)
- Total Yards/Game: 398.0 (39)
- Rush Yards/Game: 202.5 (18)
- Pass Efficiency: 130.2 (45)

**Defense**

- Points Allowed/Game: 23.8 (53)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 336.5 (46)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 125.2 (32)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 115.1 (34)

**Team**

- Turnover Margin: +9 (T-18)
- Time of Possession: 32:50.08 (4)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 65.0 (106)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Alex Carrington:** Was seventh in nation with 19 tackles-for-loss, had 10.5 sacks to finish 14th in nation.  
**Corey Leonard:** 2008 second-team All-Sun Belt, 38th in nation in total offense.  
**Reggie Arnold:** Three-time 1,000-yard rusher.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Some good players, but shouldn't have enough all-around depth to play four quarters on the road against the Huskers.
- Defense may be good enough to expose any flaws the Huskers have on offense, while offense may be good enough to keep the game close until late. These are always a dangerous combination.



# VIRGINIA TECH

SEPTEMBER 19  
BLACKSBURG, VA

2008 was supposed to be a rebuilding year for the Hokies. Their four top receivers had graduated or left the program, star running back Brandon Ore was dismissed from the team, and several running backs were injured during spring ball. But by the time they reached Lincoln, the Hokies were 3-1 with decent wins over Georgia Tech and North Carolina, where they won despite being down 17-3 with six minutes left in the third quarter.

Virginia Tech went on to win five of their last six games, winning their second-straight ACC title by destroying Boston College 30-12 in the ACC Championship Game and winning the Orange Bowl against Cincinnati. So much for the concept of a rebuilding year.

In 2009, the Hokies return 17 starters from the Orange Bowl team, 10 on offense and seven on defense. Offensively the Hokies are lead by quarterback Tyrod Taylor. Taylor made most of his plays in 2008 with his feet, rushing for 738 yards and scoring seven touchdowns. For the Hokies to reach expectations in 2009, Taylor must make more big plays in the passing game, as he tossed for only two touchdowns to go with seven interceptions. Running back Darren Evans gained over 1,250 yards, carrying the ball 287 times, nearly a third more than any other back in the ACC. He'll be joined by redshirt freshman Ryan Williams over whom Hokies fans are



*If Tyrod Taylor can improve in the passing game, Virginia Tech's offense will prosper.*

drooling because of his play-making abilities.

Replacing defensive starters doesn't seem to make a difference for Tech. Bud Foster, Tech's defensive coordinator since 1995, keeps reloading the "Lunch Pail" defense. After replacing seven starters from 2007, Tech finished 2008 as the top defense in the ACC, and seventh nationally in total defense and ninth in scoring.

Gone are the two leading tacklers, linebackers Purnell Sturdivant and Brett Warren. Also gone are All-ACC defensive end Orion Martin, and All-American Macho Harris, who was the sole Hokie taken in the NFL Draft, the worst since 1993 when no Hokies were drafted. Defensive end Jason Worilds is poised to make fans forget about Martin, while Cody Grimm stands ready at the linebacker position. If there is a defensive weakness, it's the depth of the defensive line.

By the time the Huskers reach Blacksburg in 2009, the Hokies will have already played Alabama in Atlanta and Marshall for a tune-up game. Virginia Tech may well be a national title contender if they can get past the opener against Alabama, if Tyrod Taylor can avoid injury and become a better passer, and if the defense remains true to its "Lunch Pail" form. The Huskers have a huge test in traveling to Blacksburg. **MSP**

## Hokies At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 10-4 (ACC: 6-3; 1st) Won Orange Bowl

**Last Five Years:** 52-15 (34-9 ACC)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 2-1

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 6-4

**Coach:** Frank Beamer, 177-89-2 in 22 years at Virginia Tech

**Last Year vs. Virginia Tech:** VT 35, NEB 30 @ Lincoln, NE

**All-Time vs. Virginia Tech, 1st Meeting:** Tied, 1-1, 1996

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 22.1 (90)
- Total Yards/Game: 303.4 (103)
- Rush Yards/Game: 174.4 (35)
- Pass Efficiency: 108.1 (99)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 16.7 (9)
- Yards Allowed/Game (Rank): 279.4 (7)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 104.4 (14)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 112.7 (28)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: +14 (10)
- Time of Possession: 33:00.21 (3)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 34.6 (6)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Tyrod Taylor:** Tremendous athleticism, rushed for 738 yards.

**Darren Evans:** Rushed for 1,265 yards in 2008, including 253 against Maryland.

**Ryan Williams:** Redshirt freshman has Hokie fans drooling over playmaking abilities.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Huskers can pick up a tough road win if defense can force the Hokies to throw the ball.
- Virginia Tech's Lane Stadium is one of the toughest home fields in the nation, a nasty place for a new starting quarterback to make his road debut.



# LOUISIANA-LAFAYETTE

SEPTEMBER 26  
LINCOLN, NE

Nebraska's Memorial Stadium sell-out streak will hit 300 when the Ragin' Cajuns of Louisiana-Lafayette come to Lincoln on September 26, 2008. The game will be the first-ever meeting with the Ragin' Cajuns, and the third with a Sun Belt Conference opponent.

2008 saw Louisiana finish 6-6 overall and second in the Sun Belt. The Ragin' Cajuns set school records in rushing yardage, rushing yards per game, total offensive yards per game, and touchdowns. The good news for Louisiana is they return eight starters, including all five of their starters on the offensive line. The bad news is they must replace starters at quarterback, running back, and wide receiver with no clear cut starters lined up at any of the positions.

Louisiana lost a two-year starter in quarterback Michael Desormeaux, a four-year starter in running back Tyrell Fenroy, and a three-year starter in wide receiver Jason Chery from one of the best offenses in school history. Fenroy was the 2008 Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year, and was just the seventh player in NCAA history with four 1,000-yard rushing seasons.

The Ragin' Cajun offense is led by a sturdy offensive line. Brad Bustle and Jonathan Decoster were first-team All-Sun Belt last season and both are on the 2009 Lombardi Award watch list, with Decoster also on the Rimington Trophy watch list. Chris Fisher was an All-Sun Belt honorable mention last year.

They'll be blocking for a running back unit that has a total of 72 career carries, with senior Undre Sails leading the pack. Sophomore tight end Ladarius Green was fourth in receptions in the conference and second best in touchdowns as a true freshman last season, and the receiving corps is deep although somewhat inexperienced.

No less than five quarterbacks are competing to replace Desormeaux. Sophomores Brad McGuire and Chris Masson will battle for the starting position which should be settled by the time they get to Lincoln.

The Cajuns return nine starters on a defense that goes by the nickname "TNT" for "Tackles N Turnovers." Last year's defense finished 105th nationally in total defense, but this year will be expected to carry the team until the offense comes around. "TNT" is led by senior linebacker Antwyne Zanders who tied for the lead in tackles. Free safety and two-year starter Gerren Blount is another to watch, although he was replaced at starter during the spring by junior Maurice Rolle.

Head Coach Ricky Bustle has the program moving forward, but to say that 2009 is a rebuilding year is somewhat of an understatement. Replacing three multi-year starters who accounted for 44 touchdowns is a tall order. The Ragin' Cajuns have as much speed as anyone in the Sun Belt, but their problem will be scoring points. **MSP**



*Ragin' Cajuns running back Tyrell Fenroy was only the seventh player in NCAA history with four 1,000-yard rushing seasons.*

## Ragin' Cajuns At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 6-6 (Sun Belt: 5-2; 2nd)

**Last Five Years:** 25-33 (18-17 Sun Belt)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-0

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 0-3

**Coach:** Ricky Bustle, 32-50 in 7 years at University of Louisiana-Lafayette

**Last Year vs. Louisiana-Lafayette:** N/A

**All-Time vs. University of Louisiana-Lafayette:** 2009 will be first meeting

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 33.1 (24)
- Total Yards/Game: 449.9 (13)
- Rush Yards/Game: 264.4 (7)
- Pass Efficiency: 138.7 (28)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 33.7 (105)
- Yards Allowed/Game (Rank): 429.6 (106)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 213.3 (111)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 140.4 (101)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: -5 (T-85)
- Time of Possession: 31:08.33 (32)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 58.5 (92)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Brad Bustle:** On the 2009 pre-season Lombardi Award watch list.

**Jonathan Decoster:** On 2009 pre-season Lombardi Award and Rimington Trophy watch list.

**Antwyne Zanders:** Senior linebacker leads the defense.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- New skill position starters on offense will be on the road for only the second time. Offense simply won't score enough points to be dangerous.
- The week after Virginia Tech and two weeks before Big 12 conference play, there's always a chance the Ragin' Cajuns are overlooked.



## MISSOURI

OCTOBER 8  
COLUMBIA, MO

Expectations were high for Missouri coming into last season. 2007 had seen the first 12-win season in school history, their first New Year's Day bowl since 1969, and Chase Daniel as their second Heisman finalist ever (Paul Christman finished third in 1939). In the early going in 2008, the Tigers were proving themselves to be a national title contender. They broke a 30-year losing streak in Lincoln, demolishing the Huskers 52-17. The following week, the Tigers played flat against Oklahoma State while looking ahead to Texas. The Cowboys made them pay by stomping on their national title hopes and handing them a 28-23 loss. In the first offensive series of the game, Missouri moved down the field easily, but settled for a field goal on fourth-and-goal from the six-inch line.

Up until that game, the Missouri offense had never experienced a three-and-out, but after it they were never the same, leaving Tigers fans to wonder if the mystique of an invincible offense was broken by that field goal try. The Tigers limped into the Big 12 title game after a last-minute loss to arch-rival Kansas and were crushed by Oklahoma 62-21. Missouri's 2008 season ended with them wondering what could have

been, but on a high note, as they won the Alamo Bowl 30-23 over Northwestern.

The Tigers lose a whole bunch of key players from the 2008 squad. Gone are quarterback Chase Daniel, wide receiver Jeremy Maclin, tight end Chase Coffman, defensive tackle Evander "Ziggy" Hood, defensive back William Moore, and kicker Jeff Wolfert. Maclin, Hood, and Moore were Coaches All-Big 12 first team selections, while Coffman earned second team. Jeremy Maclin was honorable mention as a kick and punt returner.

The Tigers were prolific passers last season, finishing fourth in the nation in passing offense. They won't come close to that in 2009, with new starters at quarterback, tight end, and wide receiver. Instead, the running game will be the key to success in 2009. For that, they need a strong offensive line and Missouri's may be the best in the Big 12 North.

Three starters return on a unit that is led by senior right guard Kurtis Gregory, who is as good as any in the conference. Left tackle sophomore (Seth) Elvis Fisher returns along with junior center Tim Barnes. Right tackle sophomore Dan Hoch originally committed to Nebraska, then jumped ship to the Tigers after Bill Callahan's firing at the end of 2007. Hoch got plenty of playing time as a true freshman last season. This leaves left guard as the only toss-up position, and it should be manned by sophomore Austin Wuebbels.

Sophomore quarterback Blaine Gabbert is the heir apparent to Chase Daniel. Husker fans know the name as Gabbert was another Nebraska commit that chose Missouri after Callahan was let go. The sophomore saw action in five games last season, completing five passes on 13 attempts for 43 yards. He played well enough in the spring to provide optimism amongst the Missouri faithful. True freshman quarterbacks Blaine Dalton and Ashton Glaser may be future stars, but won't be much help this season.

The top three receivers are gone from 2008, having combined for 264 of Missouri's 404 receptions. Experienced starters Jared Perry and Danario Alexander suffered injuries during spring practice but should be ready by fall. Behind them is more inexperience, although sophomore Jerrell Jackson might ultimately be the best of the bunch. Tight end sophomore Andrew Jones may some day provide an adequate replacement for Chase Coffman, but, like so many others this season, he is young and to make a difference he must develop quickly.

Running back Derrick Washington returns and will be complemented by De'Vion Moore, providing a nice one-two



*Derrick Washington's ability to run the ball is the key component to the Tigers offense in 2009.*



punch of power and speed. Washington gained over 1,000 yards rushing last season despite being slowed by injuries the later part of the year. Both backs are strong receiving threats out of the backfield.

Seven defensive starters are gone, including three from the defensive line and secondary units. First-team All-Big 12 Sean Weatherspoon may be the best linebacker in the conference, and possibly the nation, but the Tigers must find a way to get better at pass defense or Tiger fans are in for a long season. Jaron Baston is solid at one defensive tackle position while defensive ends Jacques Smith, a sophomore, and Aldon Smith (no relation), a redshirt freshman, will be expected to develop quickly and put pressure on Big 12 quarterbacks. Carl Gettis is the only returning starter in the secondary, but Missouri's pass defense was the third worst in the nation last season, so new blood might be a blessing in disguise.

Players weren't the only source of turnover from last season. Head Coach Gary Pinkel saw his core assistant coaching staff change for the first time in eight seasons. Offensive coordinator Dave Christensen left to become the head coach at Wyoming while defensive coordinator Matt Eberflus left to coach linebackers for the Cleveland Browns. Josh Henson joins the staff from LSU to coach the offensive line with Bruce Walker who was coaching tight ends. In 2009, tight ends will be handled by wide receivers coach Andy Hill. Quarterback coach David Yost is the new offensive coordinator while linebacker coach Dave Steckel took over as defensive coordinator. And don't be surprised to see Chase Daniel back on the sideline coaching quarterbacks come fall if his NFL opportunity doesn't work out.

If all that sounds confusing, imagine the result of those changes combined with a team that returns only a handful of starters on offense and defense, because that's what Missouri's 2009 season will look like. Gary Pinkel must prove that his



*Linebacker Sean Weatherspoon had 155 tackles last season, finishing first in the nation.*

run with Chase Daniel wasn't just a fluke, but it won't happen in 2009 as there are too many young players on this team to duplicate the past two seasons. If the defense can develop quickly, Missouri may keep from falling back into mediocrity, but that's highly doubtful. Missouri has done well against Nebraska in recent years, having beaten the Huskers by a combined score of 154-81 over the last four meetings. The Husker defense has given up 41 points in each of the last three trips to Columbia. Don't expect that to repeat this season, however, as Nebraska's defense improves and Missouri's offense declines. **MSP**

## Tigers At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 10-4 (Big 12: 5-4; T-4th) Won Alamo Bowl

**Last Five Years:** 42-22 (23-19 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-3

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 4-4

**Coach:** Gary Pinkel, 59-41 in 8 years at Missouri

**Last Year vs. Missouri:** Mizzou 52, Neb 17 @ Lincoln, NE

**All-Time vs. Missouri, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 63-36-3, 1892

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 42.2 (6)
- Total Yards/Game: 482.9 (8)
- Rush Yards/Game: 152.5 (53)
- Pass Efficiency: 157.8 (10)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 27.2 (T-68)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 411.5 (100)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 125.1 (31)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 133.6 (83)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: -4 (T-80)
- Time of Possession: 25:49.14 (109)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 37.3 (13)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Blaine Gabbert:** One of the top quarterback recruits in the nation in 2007.

**Derrick Washington:** A good combination of speed and power, top rusher in 2008 with over 1,000 yards.

**Sean Weatherspoon:** Amazing 155 tackles in 2008, with 3 interceptions, and 5 sacks.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Most explosive offensive starters are gone from 2008. 2009 will have Missouri trying to establish a new identity and chemistry.
- Nebraska hasn't won in Columbia since 2001, where the Tigers have scored 41 points in each of last three meetings.



# TEXAS TECH

OCTOBER 17  
LINCOLN, NE

2008 saw Texas Tech have the best season in school history, thanks to a last-second win over Texas that put Tech at 9-0 and in a three-way tie for the Big 12 South. Oklahoma got the Big 12 title and national championship game, Texas got a BCS bowl, and the Red Raiders went into the Cotton Bowl as four point favorites and lost to Mississippi, 47-34. You could call it a let down, or you could call it a precursor to 2009. It depends on whether or not Head Coach Mike Leach and the Raiders have reached their peak—will 2008 remain the greatest season in Tech history or can the Red Raiders keep the momentum going in 2009?

Receiving phenom Michael Crabtree is gone as the 10th overall 2009 NFL Draft pick, taken by the San Francisco 49ers. Quarterback Graham Harrell set the NCAA career passing touchdown record at 134, finished second in NCAA history in career passing yardage and became the first NCAA player to have over 5,000 yards in multiple seasons. Also gone are three starters from an offensive line that finished eighth in the nation in sacks allowed.

Junior Taylor Potts is next up in a line of Tech quarterbacks who throw for a bazillion yards each season. Potts played in nine games last season, going 23-36 for 260 yards with one interception and two touchdowns, so he isn't stepping into the position as a total newcomer. Baron Batch returns as the top rusher, and will be joined by redshirt freshman speed burner Harrison Jeffers.

Detron Lewis returns after having finished second in receiving yardage behind Crabtree. He and Edward Britton provide experience in the receiving corps, while true freshman Eric Ward has the talent to make some big plays in his first season.

Five of the front seven return on defense, although defensive end McKinner Dixon was suspended during spring for academic reasons and most likely will not return. Defensive tackle Colby Whitlock and linebacker Brian Duncan provide a solid core around which the defense may build, but the defensive secondary must be rebuilt, as gone are All-Big 12 safeties Darcel McBeth and Daniel Charbonnet. The defense must improve as Tech may struggle to score points as easily as they did last season.



*Taylor Potts takes over for record-setting quarterback Graham Harrell.*

It's highly doubtful that the Red Raiders can duplicate the success of 2008. Mike Leach has proven he can replace his offensive players, but the duo of Harrell and Crabtree will be extremely difficult to duplicate. Crabtree's last-second touchdown to beat Texas was one of the plays of the year last season, but few college football fans remember the Harrell to Crabtree connection on a fourth-and-5 play that set up a go-ahead touchdown near the end of the Nebraska game. Take away those two plays and Tech is their normal selves with three conference losses. Given that background, expect that the 2009 Red Raiders take a step back from the top. **MSP**

## Red Raiders At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 11-2 (Big 12: 8-1; 2nd) Lost Cotton Bowl

**Last Five Years:** 45-18 (26-14 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 2-2

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 5-2

**Coach:** Mike Leach, 76-39 in 9 years at Texas Tech

**Last Year vs. Texas Tech:** TTU 37, Neb 31 @ Lubbock, TX

**All-Time vs. Texas Tech, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 7-3, 1976

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 43.8 (3)
- Total Yards/Game: 531.0 (4)
- Rush Yards/Game: 117.9 (95)
- Pass Efficiency: 158.8 (9)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 27.8 (T-74)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 382.6 (80)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 140.4 (61)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 130.5 (72)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: +8 (T-21)
- Time of Possession: 30:16.62 (57)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 60.2 (97)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Taylor Potts:** Next in the line of Red Raider quarterbacks that throw for thousands of yards per year.

**Detron Lewis:** Top returning receiver, must improve scoring production in 2009.

**Colby Whitlock:** Probable all-conference nose tackle in 2009.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Harrell-Crabtree duo is gone. The Huskers played Tech to overtime in Lubbock last season, should be able to run on Red Raider defense and control the clock again in 2009.
- Nebraska has a three-game losing streak against Texas Tech.



## IOWA STATE

OCTOBER 24  
LINCOLN, NE

On November 10, 2008, then Iowa State Head Coach Gene Chizik announced to the Cyclone faithful, "Anybody who knows myself, my wife, my family, they know that we are firmly entrenched here in Ames," he said. "We love this university, we love who we work for, we love this football team, we love this community. We are on a journey here that will get done, and I'm as happy as I have ever been in the coaching profession, and I want to make that clear."

A little over a month later, Chizik took his 5-19 record as a head coach and fled for Auburn. Chizik had managed two conference wins in two years, going 0-8 in the Big 12 in 2008. Iowa State countered by hiring Auburn's defensive coordinator Paul Rhoads. Rhoads returns to his roots, having been born in Nevada, IA, only 10 minutes away from Jack Trice Stadium. Rhoads quickly made some right moves in hiring South Florida's Wally Burnham as his defensive coordinator and Tom Herman from Rice as offensive coordinator.

Herman is known for having a high-octane spread offense. In his first season at Rice, his offense broke 50 of the school's offensive records and in 2008 the Owls ranked in the top ten nationally in passing, scoring, and total offense. He has some decent tools to work with as Iowa State returns nine starters on offense, including junior quarterback Austen Arnaud. Arnaud's dual-threat abilities should flourish in



*Quarterback Austen Arnaud has already set records at Iowa State and should set more under new offensive coordinator Tom Herman.*

Herman's spread offense, and Herman has a group of experienced wide receivers to work with. Prolific R.J. Sumrall has moved on, but Darius Darks returns after setting the Iowa State season record for receptions by a freshman in 2008. Senior Marquis Hamilton should see many more receptions this season. Junior running back Alex Robinson has led the team in rushing the past two

seasons. The challenge on offense is in providing protection for Arnaud and opening running lanes for Robinson.

Burnham is known as the man who knows how to stop the spread offense. He will bring an aggressive, attacking style defense to Ames, which begins with getting pressure on the quarterback. Cornerback Leonard Johnson is a bright spot on a defense that was consistently burned last season. He's developed a reputation as a hard hitter—against Nebraska last season he picked off a pass and forced at least two fumbles. In 2008, he doubled as a kick returner, setting a Big 12 record with a 319-yard game against Oklahoma State. Free safety James Smith and linebacker Jesse Smith return as the top leading tacklers.

Rhoads's first goal is to win the 2009 opener against North Dakota State and end the 10-game losing streak that is currently tied for second-longest amongst FBS teams. Iowa State hasn't fared well in Lincoln, their last win coming in 1978. 2009 will be another rebuilding year. **MSP**

## Cyclones At-a-Glance

## HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 2-10 (Big 12: 0-8; 12th)

**Last Five Years:** 23-37 (11-29 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-3

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 0-5

**Coach:** Paul Rhoads, 1st season at Iowa State

**Last Year vs. Iowa State:** Neb 35, ISU 7 @ Ames, IA

**All-Time vs. Iowa State, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 85-16-2, 1896

## 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

## Offense

- Points/Game: 25.3 (59)
- Total Yards/Game: 386.8 (44)
- Rush Yards/Game: 138.4 (68)
- Pass Efficiency: 124.6 (64)

## Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 35.8 (T-111)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 451.3 (111)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 174.7 (94)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 164.2 (118)

## Team

- Turnover Margin: +4 (T-40)
- Time of Possession: 30:45.92 (38)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 57.4 (88)

## KEY PLAYERS

**Austen Arnaud:** 247 completions in 2008 set school record, 61.6% completion rate was third-best in school history.

**Darius Darks:** Set freshman record for receptions in a season in 2008.

**Leonard Johnson:** Hard hitting turnover machine.

## THE GOOD NEWS &amp; THE BAD NEWS

- Iowa State has only won six times in Lincoln since 1900, with the average score of all games being 28-8.
- Iowa State's offense wasn't bad in 2008, and might be much better in 2009. A shootout could prove deadly.



## BAYLOR

OCTOBER 31  
WACO, TX

The Baylor Bears finished 4-8 in 2008, but with the excitement swirling around the program, you'd swear their record was the other way around. Some excitement is warranted as there was enough significant progress last season to state that these aren't your same old Baylor Bears.

While the Bears won only two Big 12 games in 2008, six of their eight losses were to ranked teams (four in the top ten) and three were within a touchdown. If that doesn't sound like much, consider that before the arrival of new coach Art Briles, Baylor had lost 12 straight conference games by at least three touchdowns, the lone exception being a 10-point loss to Texas A&M in 2006.

Briles has Bears fans excited, but much of that is because the Bears return 20 of 22 starters. Ten starters are back on offense, although both offensive tackles are players that are not easily replaced. Jason Smith was first-team All-Big 12 (coaches) and was taken as the second overall pick in the NFL Draft, while Dan Gay made the Big 12 honorable mention list.

Offensively, the Bears are led by sophomore quarterback Robert Griffin III. In 2008, Griffin graduated high school early, enrolled at Baylor and joined the track team a week after the spring game. At a time when he could have been going to prom, he won the Big 12 400-meter hurdles, proving both his speed and athleticism. He finished football season as the



*The 2008 Baylor backfield of Robert Griffin and Jay Finley return in 2009 as the Bears look for a winning season and a bowl bid.*

Big 12's Offensive Freshman of the Year. His accuracy as a freshman was uncanny as he threw for 15 touchdowns with only three interceptions. While he doesn't enjoy the national recognition given Colt McCoy and Sam Bradford, 2009 should see that change.

Two of the returning linemen, guard James Barnard and center J.D. Walton, earned All-Big 12 honorable mention last

season, and Walton is a Rimington Award candidate. Tailback Jay Finley was part of rushing game that finished 2008 third in the conference, and seven of the top eight receivers return. Sophomore Kendall Wright stands out, having gained honorable-mention Freshman All-American honors.

On defense, the Bears must replace two starters on the line. Senior linebacker Joe Pawelek is a bona fide star. He lead the team in tackles with 128, and had five interceptions, good enough to rank seventh nationally in both tackles and interceptions per game. He also made the first-team All-Big 12 defense, along with hard-hitting safety Jordan Lake. Lake has had nine career games with at least 10 tackles.

Baylor is perennially marked down as an easy win when fans discuss the season's potential wins and losses, but such confidence is unwarranted as the Bears are recruiting well under Briles. **MSP**

## Bears At-a-Glance

## HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 4-8 (Big 12: 2-6; T-8th)

**Last Five Years:** 19-39 (8-32 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-5

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 0-8

**Coach:** Art Briles, 4-8 in 1 year at Baylor

**Last Year vs. Baylor:** Neb 32, BU 20 @ Lincoln, NE

**All-Time vs. Baylor, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 10-1, 1939

## 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

## Offense

- Points/Game: 28 (42)
- Total Yards/Game: 376.4 (46)
- Rush Yards/Game: 195.8 (21)
- Pass Efficiency: 136.2 (33)

## Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 29.3 (T-87)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 393.2 (86)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 137.9 (53)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 137.2 (91)

## Team

- Turnover Margin: +16 (T-5)
- Time of Possession: 27:55.42 (103)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 54.7 (78)

## KEY PLAYERS

**Robert Griffin:** Threw for 15 TDs, 3 INTs as a true freshman last season.

**Joe Pawelek:** Linebacker led team with 128 tackles last season, 5 interceptions.

**Jordan Lake:** Wraps up the tackles that get past Pawelek, senior leader of the defense with Pawelek.

## THE GOOD NEWS &amp; THE BAD NEWS

- The Bears are still building their program under Art Briles. Shouldn't have enough depth to stick with the Huskers over four quarters.
- Robert Griffin is so good this team is dangerous in every game.



## OKLAHOMA

NOVEMBER 7  
LINCOLN, NE

2009's NFL Draft in April was the biggest day of Oklahoma's season. It was a big day for the Sooners because of the players it didn't include. Heisman Trophy winner Sam Bradford and first-team All-Big 12 players Jermaine Gresham, Gerald McCoy, and Trent Williams decided to forego the draft and return to Oklahoma for one more season to pursue a national title. Considering that Bradford, Gresham, and McCoy were projected to be first-round picks, while Williams was projected as a second-rounder, the choice by all of them to return is incredulous.

There is clear reason for their return, however—a concept that Huskers fans should know well as “unfinished business.” In 2008, Oklahoma won the Big 12, and made it to the national title game against Florida, losing 24–14. While they lost their fifth BCS game in a row, the season can't be considered a disappointment by Oklahoma fans as the Sooners won an unprecedented third straight Big 12 championship and added another Heisman Trophy to their list.

Last season's Nebraska game in Oklahoma was one for Husker fans to forget as the Sooners jumped out to a 28–0 lead six minutes into the game. Bo Pelini fumed on the sideline while Oklahoma went on to a 62–28 win. Expectations weren't exactly high, but Husker fans didn't expect that type of humiliation. Yet when the Sooners come to Lincoln this season, the game will once again be seen as a measuring stick. That's to be expected when you're facing the team you want someday to be.

Offensively, the Sooners lose four of their five starting offensive linemen and their receiving corps. Williams, the lone offensive line veteran, will move from right tackle to left, while Cory Brandon and LSU transfer Jarvis Jones compete for the other tackle spot. The guard spots will be filled by senior Brian Simmons, junior Colorado State transfer Brian Lepak, sophomore Stephen Good, or sophomore Alex Williams. Four-year starting center Jon Cooper will be replaced by redshirt freshman Ben Habern or Lepak. Oklahoma's overall depth means they don't need to resort to redshirt freshmen across the board, but any offensive line unit requires time working together to be good.

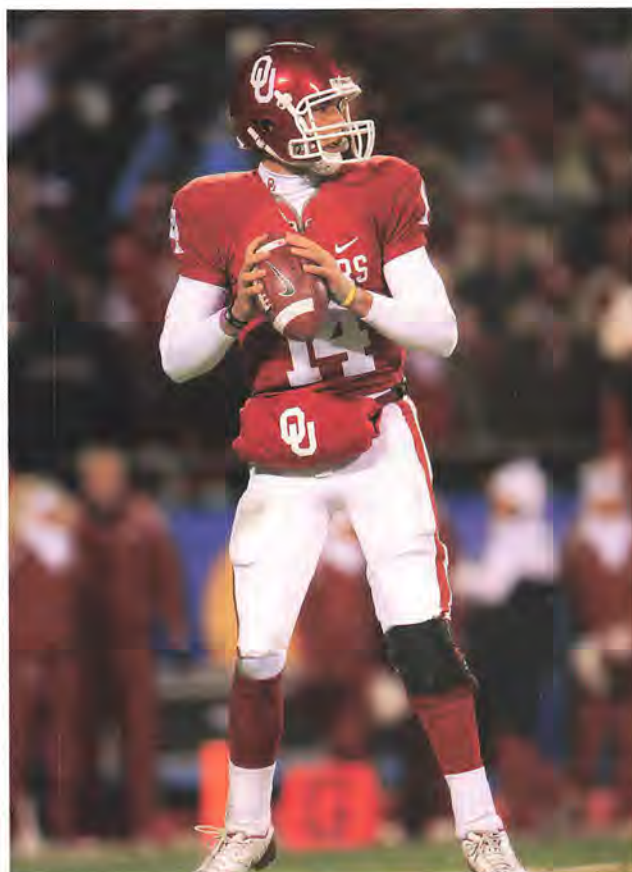
The running back unit includes two returning 1,000 yard rushers in DeMarco Murray who gained first-team All-Big 12 honors, and Chris Brown. Brown gained more yards, 1,220 to 1,002, although Murray is largely regarded as the better back. The third returning rusher is Mossis Madu, with 475 yards and six touchdowns. Adding to the power running game is first-team All-Big 12 fullback Matt Clapp. Oklahoma

has an amazing amount of depth in the running game, so they could replace either Murray or Brown with little drop-off in talent.

Tight end Jermaine Gresham is likely the best in the nation and should evoke memories of Keith Jackson. Gresham was unstoppable last season and with the departure of experienced receivers, he's sure to get even more work. He's a red-zone target and finished sixth in the nation in touchdown receptions last season.

The receiving corps lost Juaquin Iglesias, Manuel Johnson, and Quentin Chaney, the former two having finished second and ninth in career receptions at Oklahoma. Sure-handed Ryan Broyles returns after having set a school record for freshman receiving yardage. He'll be joined by seniors Brandon Caleb, Adron Tennell, and sophomores Dejuan Miller and Jameel Owens, all of whom have played sparingly.

Whether Sooner fans will freely admit it or not, the offense goes as Heisman Trophy winner Sam Bradford goes.



*As Sam Bradford goes so goes the Oklahoma offense—the only thing left for Bradford is a national title.*





*When you consider Gerald McCoy, think of Ndamukong Suh except that he plays for Oklahoma.*

Bradford comes into his junior season already one of the most successful quarterbacks in college football history. Expect Bradford's overall numbers to go down as the Sooners move to more of a ground game, where they overpower their opponents then rely on play-action and pass efficiency to break their will. Backing up Bradford is a redshirt freshman, Landry Jones, and new recruit Drew Allen, so not much depth and no experience.

Defensively, Oklahoma is lead by defensive tackle, AP second-team All-American Gerald McCoy. McCoy should remind Husker fans of Ndamukong Suh.

DeMarcus Granger locks down the other tackle spot

while Auston English and Jeremy Beal are the defensive ends. Oklahoma regularly rotates their defensive ends, so Frank Alexander will be the third end in the rotation. English was picked as the 2008 Big 12 Preseason Defensive Player of the Year before he sprained his knee against Nebraska and missed the rest of the season. Alexander and Beal both gained mentions as All-Big 12 performers. The unit may be the best in the conference.

Linebacker Travis Lewis played well enough to receive awards for Big 12 Defensive Newcomer of the Year (AP) and Freshman Defensive Player of the Year (Coaches). Keenan Clayton returns as another defender with All-Big 12 honors. Ryan Reynolds led the defense last season as a middle linebacker until he tore his ACL against Texas and he may not return. If he doesn't make it back, senior Mike Balogun should start in his spot. Balogun made two starts last season, and, at age 25 last year, was the oldest Sooner in 40 years. Like the line, the linebacking unit is stocked with talent.

Safeties Nic Harris and Lendy Holmes are gone from the secondary, but their replacements, Quinton Carter and Sam Proctor, might be better. Corners Brian Jackson and Dominique Franks were new starters in 2008, but now must be considered one of the better tandems in the conference.

Oklahoma's expectations are very high, as high as they can go, and that's to be expected when you return the bulk of a team that competed for a national title last season. The Sooners have talent everywhere, but every team has a weakness. Oklahoma's biggest weakness, the offensive line, may play to the Huskers' greatest strength, the defensive line, and after last season Nebraska has plenty to prove. An upset bid is unlikely, but if the defensive line can get pressure on Bradford and shut down Oklahoma's running game, anything can happen. **MSP**

## Sooners At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 12-2 (Big 12: 8-1;1st) Lost BCS Championship

**Last Five Years:** 54-13 (38-6 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 5-2

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 7-2

**Coach:** Bob Stoops, 109-24 in 10 years at Oklahoma

**Last Year vs. Oklahoma:** OU 62, Neb 28 @ Norman, OK

**All-Time vs. Oklahoma, 1st Meeting:** Oklahoma, 44-37-3, 1912

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 51.1 (1)
- Total Yards/Game: 547.9 (3)
- Rush Yards/Game: 198.5 (20)
- Pass Efficiency: 176.2 (1)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 24.5 (T-58)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 367.7 (68)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 116.2 (20)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 118.1 (46)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: +23 (1)
- Time of Possession: 29:25.71 (81)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 64.6 (105)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Sam Bradford:** Needs no introduction.

**DeMarco Murray/Chris Brown:** Pair of 1,000-yard rushers return as part of an offense that was 3rd nationally overall, 20th rushing.

**Gerald McCoy:** Perhaps the only Big 12 defensive tackle better than Ndamukong Suh.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- The strength of the Husker defense may fit perfectly with the Sooners' potential weakness, the game is in Lincoln, and the Huskers have a lot to prove after last year's debacle.
- The core of a team returns that blasted the Huskers last season in Norman, position by position, the Sooners are loaded.



# KANSAS

**NOVEMBER 14**  
**LAWRENCE, KS**

The Kansas Jayhawks will enter the 2009 season no doubt picked as the pre-season Big 12 North favorite by most media outlets. The selection isn't without merit, as the Jayhawks return all of their skill position players on offense and the majority of their defense.

After going 12-1 and having the best season in school history in 2007, 2008 had to be somewhat of a disappointment. Kansas finished 8-5 last year and third in the Big 12 North with losses against conference foes Oklahoma, Texas, Texas Tech, and Nebraska. There were some bright spots, however, as Mark Mangino guided the Jayhawks to their first back-to-back bowl wins in school history and the season finished strong with last minute win over rival Missouri and a 42-21 win over Minnesota in the Insight Bowl.

The Jayhawks return the majority of last year's team, eight starters on offense and seven on defense. On the offense, the Jayhawks must replace the interior of the line, a potential problem as quarterback Todd Reesing was consistently chased last season and then slowed towards the end due to nagging injuries. Spring saw the Jayhawks lock down starters at tackle and center. Sophomore Jeremiah Hatch will

start at center after playing tackle last season while fellow sophomore Jeff Spikes starts at right tackle. Converted tight end Tanner Hawkinson should be the left tackle starter while the guard positions remain open. Potential starters include juniors Carl Wilson and Sal Capra, and redshirt freshmen John Williams and Trevor Marrongelli. Whoever wins the jobs, it must be noted that Kansas returns the least amount of starts on the offensive line of any Big 12 team.

Jayhawk fans look forward to the return of their productive offensive tandem of Reesing, wide receivers Dezmon Briscoe and Kerry Meier, and running back Jake Sharp. Briscoe gets most of the attention, but Kerry Meier can't be discounted as he set a school record for single-season receptions with 97, and a single-game reception record with 14 against Missouri (including the last-minute game winner). For the past couple seasons, Meier has had double duty as the backup quarterback. 2009 should see him freed of those duties, which means he can focus on the receiver position. Briscoe is certainly no slouch, setting a school record in 2008 for single-season reception yardage with 1,407 yards. Both receivers caught at least 90 passes last season, are tough, and capable of making catches in traffic.

Kansas used the running back "by committee" approach during the 2008 non-conference schedule, after which Sharp emerged as the clear-cut starter. Sharp has been overshadowed by his more productive teammates, and he's overlooked by defenses, but he's a dependable running and receiving threat who has breakaway speed. Jockes Crawford, the JUCO Player of the Year in 2007, should share time with Sharp. Crawford struggled in 2008 as he tried to adjust to FBS competition, and 2009 is his last chance to display his talent for NFL scouts.

Todd Reesing returns as already the most successful passer in school history, having set 30 school records. In 2008, he ranked in the top ten nationally in passing yards, total offense, and completions. He's 20-6 as a starter, but it's not the records or statistics that tell Reesing's tale. Reesing is a tough, gutty performer who's willing to sacrifice his body making plays for his team, and other players on his team look to him for that leadership.

On defense, Kansas needs to replace three starting linebackers as Mike Rivera, Joe Mortensen, and James Holt held down those positions for the past two seasons. They accounted for a combined 103 starts and 821 tackles over their careers. Former running back Angus Quigley moved to linebacker, the results of which may be the same as Husker

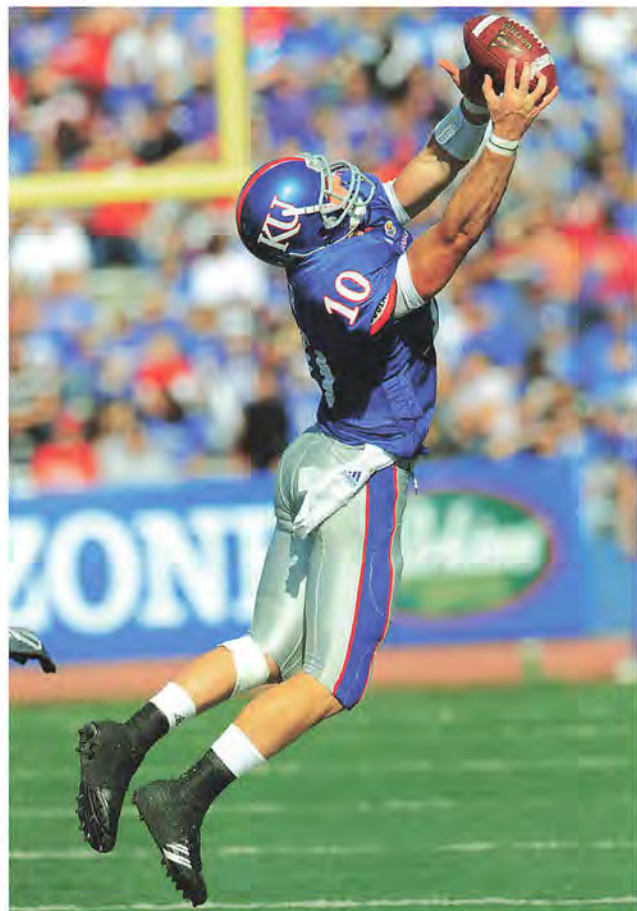


*Todd Reesing is the Big 12 North's top returning quarterback in 2009.*



Cody Glenn's move in 2008. Arist Wright should man an outside linebacker position after starting two games last year. Kansas may move to the nickel as their base defense, as they are strong in the secondary, so linebacker concerns could be somewhat negated.

The defensive line unit should be decent, but must get more pressure on opposing quarterbacks. Dependable



*Wide receiver Dezmon Briscoe gets the publicity, but Kerry Meier is a clutch playmaker.*

starter at defensive end Russell Brorsen is gone, although Jake Laptad came on strong last season, starting the final six games of the year and leading the defensive line in tackles. Caleb Blakesley and Jamal Greene lock down the interior. Blakesley garnered All-Big 12 honorable mention honors in 2008, while Greene came on late in the season to start the final seven games.

First-team All-Big 12 safety Darrel Stuckey is the leader of the defense. He finished 2008 second on the team in tackles and had five interceptions. He's joined by Justin Thornton, who switched from safety to cornerback and led the team in pass breakups. Sophomore cornerback Daymond Patterson started the final seven games of last season after beginning his career as a wide receiver. Nickelbacks Chris Harris and Corrigan Powell have starting experience.

Kansas hasn't won a conference title since 1968 and they've never made it to the Big 12 title game. There has to be a sense of urgency in Jayhawkland as Reesing, Meier, Sharp, and Stuckey are all seniors playing in their final season (Briscoe is a junior, but if he has another season like 2008, the NFL will look too enticing to turn down).

Despite offensive line inexperience, the Jayhawks are the most stocked team in the Big 12 North, but their schedule may keep them from winning it. They play Oklahoma and Texas again this season, and must travel to Lubbock to face Texas Tech, so they face (potentially) the top three teams in the Big 12 South. The Huskers travel to Lawrence this year for a game that could determine the Big 12 North winner.

Nebraska has lost the last two trips to Lawrence by embarrassing margins, including the 76-39 debacle in 2007. They'll face another tough task this season as the Jayhawks should be able to score a lot of points. If the Husker offense is struggling when they head to Kansas, the result could be a loss of not only the game but the Big 12 North title. **MSP**

## Jayhawks At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 8-5 (Big 12: 4-4; 7th) Won Insight Bowl

**Last Five Years:** 37-24 (19-21 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 1-3

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 3-5

**Coach:** Mark Mangino, 45-41 in 7 years at Kansas

**Last Year vs. Kansas:** Neb 45, KU 35 @ Lincoln, NE

**All-Time vs. Kansas, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 89-23-3, 1892

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 33.4 (T-22)
- Total Yards/Game: 431.8 (21)
- Rush Yards/Game: 126.8 (84)
- Pass Efficiency: 149.8 (17)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 28.8 (83)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 396.7 (90)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 123.1 (28)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 129.9 (70)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: +3 (T-43)
- Time of Possession: 30:25.00 (52)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 44.3 (38)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Todd Reesing:** Big 12 North's top returning quarterback, most successful in Kansas history.

**Dezmon Briscoe:** Ranked fourth nationally in receiving yards per game.

**Kerry Meier:** Broke single-season reception record by 27 catches, playmaker in clutch situations.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Huskers defense should take advantage of inexperienced offensive line.
- Huskers have been blown out in Lawrence recently. The Nebraska mystique is gone, and no longer a factor.



# KANSAS STATE

NOVEMBER 21  
LINCOLN, NE

Bill Snyder returns to a Kansas State program that's fallen back towards where it was when he arrived the first time in 1989. Prior to Snyder's first go round, Kansas State had gone to one bowl game in school history and had won only five Big Eight games in six seasons.

Ron Prince's first season in 2006 started off well enough with a 7-6 record and a bowl trip, but his second season saw the Wildcats drop back to 5-7. In 2008, he took a chance on a quick rebuild and brought in 19 JUCO transfers. The result was disastrous. Kansas State's defense was horrible in 2008, even worse than Nebraska's in 2007. They gave up over 50 points four times and an average of over 47 points in the last five games. Prince was dismissed and, perhaps in a state of desperation, Kansas State called on Bill Snyder to resurrect the program. Again. The current situation can't entirely be blamed on Ron Prince. He merely placed the final blow on a program that was already falling to the ground as Snyder had suffered back-to-back losing seasons before he retired in 2005.

Snyder's first step in the right direction was the hiring of Vic Koenning. In his three years as defensive coordinator at Clemson, his defenses finished in the top 25 in rushing, pass efficiency, and total and scoring defense. Snyder has already begun the rebuilding process by bringing back the cupcake schedule as Kansas State is the only program in the Big 12 that will play two FCS programs in 2009.

What Snyder has to work with in his first year back is anybody's guess, but he must find some players around which to build. Quarterback Carson Coffman returns in 2009 after Josh Freeman left for the NFL. Coffman is best remembered by Husker fans for providing a spark to the Wildcat offense after Freeman was sidelined in 2008 with a concussion.



*Brandon Harold played as a freshman in 2008 and could develop into a future star at defensive end.*

Coffman's top targets will be Lamark Brown, the top returning rusher who shifts to wide receiver, and 5'7" Brandon Banks, a speedy receiver who'll stretch defenses.

On defense, sophomore defensive end Brandon Harold could develop to all-conference status while defensive tackle Daniel Calvin is a big physical player who'll stop up the middle. Top returning tackler Ulla Pomele returns at linebacker, while Tysyn Hartman shows some promise in the secondary.

If everything goes right for Snyder, he could have the Wildcats back to respectability in two or three years. If not, they could slip back into the worst-team-ever mode they were in before he arrived for the first time. However, Snyder's first priority is eating those non-conference cupcakes. **MSP**

## Wildcats At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 5-7 (Big 12: 2-6; T-8th)

**Last Five Years:** 26-33 (13-27 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 0-3

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 0-5

**Coach:** Bill Snyder, 136-68-1 in 17 years at Kansas State (Fired after '04, rehired this year)

**Last Year vs. Kansas State:** Neb 56, KSU 28 @ Manhattan, KS

**All-Time vs. Kansas State, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 76-15-2, 1911

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 34.9 (T-18)
- Total Yards/Game: 402.1 (34)
- Rush Yards/Game: 132.5 (76)
- Pass Efficiency: 135.1 (36)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 35.8 (T-111)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 479.1 (118)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 217.7 (113)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 138.3 (96)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: -7 (T-93)
- Time of Possession: 27:39.75 (109)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 46.4 (46)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Carson Coffman:** Typical drop-back passer.

**Brandon Banks:** Small but speedy lead returning wide receiver.

**Brandon Harold:** Made 10 starts as true freshman, ranked 1st nationally among freshmen in tackles-for-loss.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Too many question marks for the Wildcats to be competitive with the upper echelon teams in the Big 12 North.
- A loss to the Wildcats would be inexplicable.



# COLORADO

**NOVEMBER 28**  
**BOULDER, CO**

Dan Hawkins raised more than a few eyebrows when, at the Buffaloes' senior banquet in December 2008, he stated that the goal for the 2009 team is "10 wins and no excuses." Ten wins is a pretty tall order for a team that hasn't won more than six games in Hawkins' three-year reign. Hawkins' record at Colorado stands at 13–24, which so far must be regarded as a failure especially when compared to the 53–11 mark and four WAC championships over five years he compiled during his stint with Boise State.

The "no excuses" part of the declaration is Hawkins' recognition of the toll that injuries took on his team in 2008. The Buffs suffered 10 season-ending injuries, which resulted in a total of 110 games being missed by players who were significant in two-deep rotations or special teams. Running back Rodney Stewart showed promise before he broke his leg on a play at Texas A&M where he was brought down by a horse-collar tackle. Fellow running back Darrell Scott spent most of the season injured and starting wide receiver Markques Simas didn't help matters by sitting out 2008 for academic reasons. Other important starters who missed playing time include offensive guard Max Tuoti-Mariner, offensive tackle Ryan Miller, cornerback Ben Burney, and offensive lineman Mike Iltis.

The Buffaloes return 10 starters on offense, although that's somewhat misleading given the players who received starts filling in for injuries. Perennial starter center Daniel Sanders is gone from the offensive line unit, but if a good replacement is found, the Buffs line could be as good as any in the conference. There are three returning starters at tackle. Matt Bahr, Ryan Miller, and Nate Solder should start, although Bahr or Miller may move to guard. Bryce Givens, a Nebraska recruit until Bill Callahan's firing in 2007, should get a shot at playing time this season and started most of the spring opposite of Solder at right tackle. Two-year starter at tackle Ryan Miller took reps at right guard this spring due to Givens' emergence. Blake Behrens will fill in a guard position. Devin Head was ruled academically ineligible and will not play in 2009, a big blow to the Buffaloes as he was the only

returning senior. Behrens, Ethan Adkins, Sione Tau, and Max Tuoti-Mariner will fight for what looks like the only remaining spot on the offensive line at guard. Mike Iltis has filled in nicely at center for Sanders and should be the starter.

If they can stay healthy, running backs Stewart and Scott may become one of the best tandems in the Big 12. Stewart started over Scott last season (when both were healthy), but he must fully recover from his broken leg, while Scott has lost 20 pounds since last season and worked hard on strength and conditioning to improve his already explosive speed. Junior Demetrius Sumler received plenty of playing time last season due to the young duo's injuries and should see plenty again in 2009. Watch out for scatback Brian Lockridge, whose burst and speed rival anyone's on the team.

The tight end unit is strong, led by seniors Riar Greer and Patrick Devenny, with Ryan Deehan figuring in the mix. The wide receivers must become more consistent, but the unit has potential. Scotty McKnight returns after leading the team in receptions the past two seasons, as does Simas after straightening out his academic issues. Simas has the talent to be a playmaker. CU fans were shocked when Josh Smith announced his transfer in June. Smith is an explosive playmaker, pulling triple duty last season, returning kicks and punts, allowing him to finish third in the conference and ninth in the nation in all-purpose yardage. His transfer significantly damages Colorado's big-play ability.



*Darrell Scott is part of a running back tandem with Rodney Stewart that could be the Big 12's best in 2009.*

Photo: Doug Rossinger/Getty Images



Colorado's offense was inconsistent at best last season largely due to the play of quarterback Cody Hawkins. Part of his inconsistency can be dismissed as growing pains and part due to offensive injuries—at least that's what Buffs fans are hoping. If the Buffs are going to challenge for the Big 12 North, Hawkins' touchdown to interception ratio must vastly improve (17 TDs, 10 interceptions in 2008). Backup Tyler Hansen broke the thumb on his throwing hand during the spring game, but should be fine by fall. Hawkins and Hansen are the only quarterbacks on the roster after redshirt freshman Matt Ballenger left the program in the spring, forcing incoming freshmen Clark Evans and Josh Moten into third-string duty.

Defensively, Colorado has five starters returning, but must find replacements for a defensive line that accounted for a combined 130 starts. Defensive tackle George Hypolite is gone after underachieving last season, as is nose tackle Brandon Nicholas. The unit has a logjam similar to the Husker linebacking corps, with no less than seven players vying for a starting position.

Behind them, the back seven is strong. Shaun Mohler leads the linebackers after a solid first season as a JUCO transfer. Most of a strong secondary returns after finishing second in pass defense in the Big 12 last season. Cornerback Jimmy Smith should be a full-time starter this year and is probably the Buffs' top NFL prospect. Smith has great size and athleticism—Husker fans will remember him as the player who returned the botched fake field goal for a touchdown in last year's game. Cha'pelle Brown may be the opposite corner. What Brown lacks in size (5'7", 170 pounds), he makes up in consistent play. Brown will be pressed by Benjamin Burney who returns from injury while Jalil Brown and Anthony Wright figure in the rotation. At safety, sophomores Patrick Mahnke and Anthony Perkins will be called to replace seniors but they gained experience last year including starts in Lincoln.



*Cody Hawkins must be a more consistent passer if the Buffaloes hope to have success this season.*

Husker fans disregard Colorado as a rival, and Buffaloes fans resent it, much like unrequited love (which is what makes it so fun for us). However, it leads to a tendency to dismiss the Buffaloes. Objectively, this year's Colorado team could be the surprise of the Big 12 North if defensive line starters can find and put pressure on opposing quarterbacks, and if the quarterback play can be more consistent. There are only 18 seniors on the Colorado roster, so there will be little loss next season. If the Buffaloes aren't a contender this season, then they will be the next. Either way, by the time November rolls around, the collision in Boulder should be huge. **MSP**

## Buffaloes At-a-Glance

### HISTORICAL RECORD

**2008 Overall:** 5-7 (Big 12: 2-6; T-8th)

**Last Five Years:** 28-35 (17-25 Big 12)

**2008 vs. Ranked Teams:** 1-4

**2008 vs. Winning Teams:** 2-6

**Coach:** Dan Hawkins, 13-24 in 3 years at Colorado

**Last Year vs. Colorado:** Neb 40, CU 31 @ Lincoln, NE

**All-Time vs. Colorado, 1st Meeting:** Nebraska, 47-18-2, 1898

### 2008 STATS (Ntl. Rank out of 120)

#### Offense

- Points/Game: 20.2 (100)
- Total Yards/Game: 318.5 (95)
- Rush Yards/Game: 124.5 (87)
- Pass Efficiency: 113.2 (90)

#### Defense

- Points Allowed/Game: 29.3 (T-87)
- Yards Allowed/Game: 381.6 (79)
- Rush Yards Allowed/Game: 166.3 (88)
- Pass Efficiency Against: 130.8 (74)

#### Team

- Turnover Margin: -7 (T-93)
- Time of Possession: 28:57.08 (84)
- Penalty Yards/Game: 43.0 (T-30)

### KEY PLAYERS

**Darrell Scott/Rodney Stewart:** Behind a good offensive line these two running backs will excel.

**Markques Simas:** Sat out 2008 because of academics, but will be a playmaker at receiver.

**Shaun Mohler:** Linebacker made All-Big 12 honorable mention his first season as JUCO transfer.

### THE GOOD NEWS & THE BAD NEWS

- Colorado has been inconsistent at best on offense, while the defensive line could be weak in run defense and quarterback pressure.
- The Buffaloes are young, but will develop over the season into a good team.



# Nebraska Cornhuskers

## 2009 Schedule

Date	Opponent	Location
Sep 5	Florida Atlantic	Memorial Stadium
Sep 12	Arkansas State	Memorial Stadium
Sep 19	@ Virginia Tech	Blacksburg, VA
Sep 26	Louisiana-Lafayette	Memorial Stadium
Oct 8	@ Missouri	Columbia, MO
Oct 17	@ Texas Tech	Memorial Stadium
Oct 24	Iowa State	Memorial Stadium
Oct 31	@ Baylor	Waco, TX
Nov. 7	Oklahoma	Memorial Stadium
Nov 14	@ Kansas	Lawrence, KS
Nov 21	Kansas State	Memorial Stadium
Nov 27	@ Colorado	Boulder, CO





# THE FIRST STEP IN RESTORATION

## 2008 Season Review

by Mike Jaixen

**H**usker fans anxiously looked to the 2008 season as a chance to erase the bad memories of the Bill Callahan-Steve Pederson era (the “Callahan-Pederson Error”?), not to mention the bad taste the 2007 season left in everybody’s mouth. So anxious were they that the spring game sold out a week beforehand, scalpers were asking as much as \$95 for reserved seat tickets, and fans started lining up more than six hours before kickoff to claim the best seats in the general admission sections of the stadium.

That’s not a misprint. Fans paid \$95 and stood in line for hours to watch a scrimmage.

The regime change at the top of the program brought a change in how the squads were selected for the spring game. Under Bill Callahan, the game featured the starters and top backups playing against the scout team, with the result being a one-sided mismatch. In 2008, the squads were chosen via a draft, which meant each squad was relatively balanced. The game opened with a tribute play, a short-side option run by redshirt freshman quarterback Patrick Witt, which was broken up when senior linebacker Tyler Wortman forced Witt to fumble, setting up an easy touchdown run for Marlon Lucky three plays later. A few minutes later, quarterback Joe Ganz hit redshirt freshman wide receiver Curenski Gilleylen for a 77-yard touchdown pass and a 14-0 White lead barely six minutes into the game. The scoring pace slowed down from there, and on a beautiful sunny April afternoon, the White team posted a 24-14 victory over the Reds. Fans, though, were just happy to see the Huskers back on the field.

Many questions remained going into the 2008 season. Who would fill the void at wide receiver left by the graduation of Maurice Purify and Terrence Nunn? On defense, could Cody Glenn be converted from an injury-prone running back to an every-down linebacker? And most importantly, how would the Husker defense recover from





*Husker fans lined up early for general seating to see the team in action at the 2008 Red-White Spring Game.*

a disastrous 2007 that saw it give up 172 points in the final three games of the season? Largely because of the lackluster play of 2007, Bo Pelini did not award Blackshirts at the start of the season—defenders would be forced to earn them.

### WESTERN MICHIGAN AT NEBRASKA

After the longest offseason in 40 years, the Huskers took the field on a warm August evening for Bo Pelini's regular season debut against Western Michigan. On Western Michigan's opening offensive play, Cody Glenn sacked Broncos quarterback Tim Heller, making a quick statement about his readiness to play linebacker. The defense forced a punt, and less than two minutes later Marlon Lucky scored from 14 yards out to complete a four-play, 61-yard drive for the opening score of the season.

After another Bronco punt, Joe Ganz hit tight end Mike McNeill for a short touchdown pass to go up 14-0. Cody Glenn forced a Bronco fumble, setting up a 44-yard Alex Henery field goal for a 17-0 Husker lead early in the second quarter. Western Michigan responded with a 10-play, 80-yard touchdown drive aided by two 15-yard penalties on Anthony West, one wiping out a Matt O'Hanlon interception that was returned 69 yards deep into Bronco territory. But on the ensuing drive, Ganz hit Nate Swift for a 61-yard touchdown that pushed the lead to 24-7. After both teams kicked field goals, Ganz connected once again with Swift just before halftime to make the score 34-10.

In the third quarter, Heller burned the Husker secondary for a pair of 50-yard passes on Bronco touchdown drives,

though Ganz countered with his own 55-yard toss to Dreu Young that led to a Marlon Lucky touchdown catch. Leading 44-24 early in the fourth quarter, Ganz threw two interceptions, though the defense held the Broncos in check. A late Henery field goal finished the scoring for a 47-24 victory. Western Michigan finished the season 9-3, losing to Rice in the Texas Bowl.

### SAN JOSE STATE AT NEBRASKA

San Jose State scored with eight seconds left in their season opener the previous week, narrowly defeating 1-AA Cal-Davis 13-10. However, once they got to Lincoln, the Spartans didn't

wait to get their offense rolling. Against the Huskers, on their opening drive, the Spartans capitalized on several missed tackles by out-of-position defenders, scoring on a 12-yard Kyle Reed run to take a 6-0 lead after Will Johnson's extra point hit the upright. Nebraska responded with a nine-play, 86-yard drive capped by a short Quentin Castille touchdown run to lead 7-6. Shortly after that, Zach Potter batted a Reed pass into the arms of Ndamukong Suh, who rumbled 49 yards for a touchdown. Johnson missed another kick, this time a 41-yard field goal attempt after a long drive. The Spartans switched kickers, and Jared Strubeck hit a 41-yard field goal to make the score 14-9. Just before halftime, Joe Ganz threw an interception, but Strubeck's 32-yard field goal attempt hit the upright as time expired. In the first half, San Jose State gained 236 yards of offense, compared to Nebraska's 99, as the Huskers had only run 23 first-half plays with three punts and an interception.

The punters dominated the third quarter until Quentin Castille fumbled at midfield, taking his eye off the ball after seeing a wide open field in front of him. After the Spartans' ensuing drive stalled, Strubeck converted a 27-yard field goal to cut the Husker lead to 14-12 early in the fourth quarter, but Niles Paul returned the ensuing kickoff 86 yards for a touchdown. The long return awoke the Big Red, who proceeded to knock Spartan quarterback Kyle Reed out of the game. Roy Helu followed with a 14-yard touchdown run to make the score 28-12. Spartan backup quarterback Eden Myles came back and burned the NU secondary for a 55-yard completion to Kevin Jurovich to setup a first-and-goal.



The Spartan threat ended two plays later, when Zach Potter intercepted a Myles pass. Marlon Lucky finished the scoring with a two-yard touchdown run to cap off a 10-play, 74-yard drive for a 35-12 final score. The 23 point final margin concealed the actual closeness of the game, which did very little to dispel the doubts the 2007 season left in the minds of Husker fans. San Jose State would go on to finish 6-6 on the season, good for sixth place in the nine team WAC.

## NEW MEXICO STATE AT NEBRASKA

Fellow WAC member New Mexico State came to Lincoln next, and started the evening game with a 15-play drive that consumed nearly 11 minutes of the first quarter. The Lobo drive went for naught after Zach Potter blocked a chip-shot field goal. Nebraska responded with a 15-play, 71-yard drive that ended with a field goal miss by Alex Henery. After a



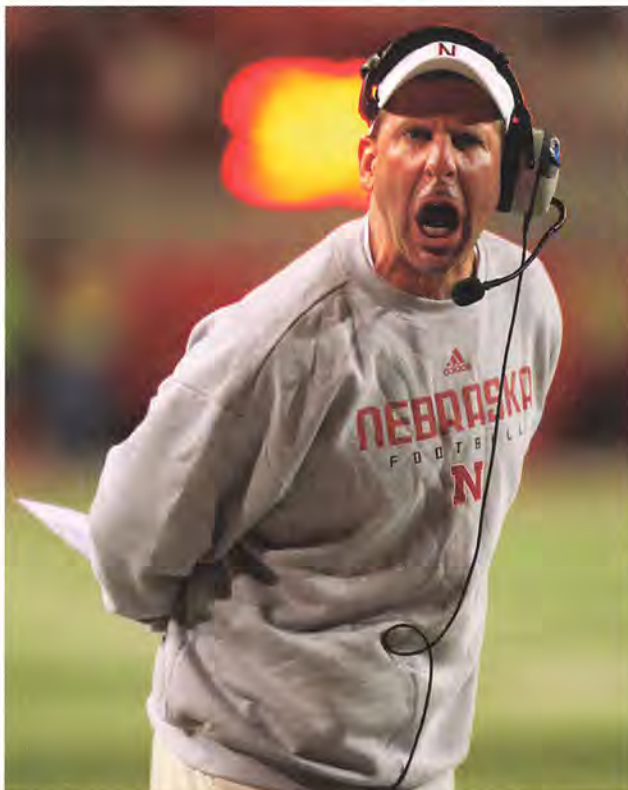
*The Red-White Spring Game was a sellout as fans were ecstatic to see a new coaching staff, the return of Tom Osborne, and a new era.*

Lobo punt, Marlon Lucky scored on a eight-yard touchdown run at the end of the first quarter. Early in the second quarter, Armando Murillo picked off Lobo quarterback Chase Holbrook, returning it deep into Lobo territory. Marlon Lucky threw a 20-yard touchdown pass back to Joe Ganz for a 14-0 lead. A Ganz 33-yard touchdown run widened the lead to 21-0. Just before halftime, another Husker drive ended when Ganz was stopped at the four yard line on fourth down.

On the second play of the third quarter, Marlon Lucky sprinted 58 yards to the NMSU 16 yard line, then scored four plays later, increasing the Husker lead to 28-0. A Ganz 35-yard touchdown pass to Mike McNeill made the score 35-0. A Lobo scoring threat at the start of the fourth quarter ended when walk-on safety Matt O'Hanlon intercepted Holbrook, but the Husker shutout bid ended when New Mexico State scored on a three-yard touchdown run one play after the Lobos' Marvin Betts returned a fumble by Husker backup quarterback Patrick Witt 48 yards. Witt redeemed himself by leading the Huskers deep into the red zone, setting up Alex Henery's 19-yard field goal for the 38-7 final score. New Mexico State would go on to finish 3-9 and fire head coach Hal Mumme at the end of the season.

## VIRGINIA TECH AT NEBRASKA

The first three games were viewed by many fans as quasi-exhibitions, as the focus was on the Virginia Tech game. ABC televised the match-up in prime time, adding to the atmosphere. After an early exchange of punts, Nebraska found themselves facing third-and-2 from their own 14 yard line. Joe Ganz's pass was batted down, and the ensuing punt was



*Bo Pelini's antics early in the season caused some concern, at one point drawing him a costly personal foul near the end of the Virginia Tech game.*



blocked for a safety. The Hokie offense failed to capitalize, though the Hokie defense stepped up again. Victor "Macho" Harris picked off Ganz on first down to set up a five-yard touchdown drive for a 9-0 lead. The Huskers rebounded quickly, as Joe Ganz and Mike McNeill combined for a 27-yard reception and then a 32-yard touchdown pass to cut the Hokie lead to 9-7. After a 41-yard kickoff return, the Hokie offense finally started to click, as quarterback Tyrod Taylor completed a 40-yard pass to Andre Smith to set up a field goal, making it 12-7 early in the second quarter. Nebraska and Virginia Tech exchanged field goals on their next drives to make the score 15-10. Just before halftime, Virginia Tech drove deep into Husker territory again, only to have the Husker defense stiffen up in the red zone and force a 27-yard field goal for an 18-10 Hokie halftime lead.

Virginia Tech opened the third quarter like it finished the second: driving deep into Husker territory, only to settle for another field goal. Nebraska's offense sputtered, and Macho Harris's punt return set the Hokies up in Nebraska territory. Three Darren Evans runs later, the Hokies had opened up a 28-10 lead. The Huskers countered with a 12-play scoring drive, with Roy Helu breaking tackle after tackle to cut the lead to 28-17 at the end of the third quarter. Midway through the fourth, Nate Swift fielded a Hokie punt at the NU 12, cut twice to avoid the initial pursuit, then followed his blockers for an 88-yard touchdown return, the fourth longest punt return in Nebraska history. The Hokie lead was trimmed to 28-23 after the two-point conversion failed.

On Tech's next drive, after moving the ball to the Nebraska 35, quarterback Tyrod Taylor was forced out of bounds by Pierre Allen to apparently set up a fourth-and-2 situation, but Ndamukong Suh was flagged for a late hit out of bounds, giving the Hokies a fresh set of downs. Bo Pelini was so incensed by the call that the officials penalized him for unsportsmanlike conduct. The penalties gave the Hokies a first down at the Nebraska 11, setting up a Tech touchdown three plays later, making the score 35-23 with 2:28 left in the game. On the touchdown, Suh vented his frustration with the previous calls and was penalized once again for unsportsmanlike conduct.

Down two scores with time running short, Ganz completed two long passes to Nate Swift and then found Todd Peterson for a 17-yard touchdown to quickly cut the Hokie lead to 35-30. The Hokies recovered the onside kick, but failed to run out the clock giving the Huskers a glimmer of hope in the final seconds. Ganz completed a pair of desperation passes before Todd Peterson fumbled at the Virginia Tech 44 yard line to end the game. Virginia Tech would go on to finish 10-4 and win the ACC championship and the Orange Bowl.

## MISSOURI AT NEBRASKA

Husker fans anxiously anticipated payback against Missouri for the blowout loss that began the 2007 season's tailspin. Missouri hadn't won in Lincoln in 30 years, and hopes were high that the Huskers would make a statement in the 8 p.m. late start. Unfortunately, it was the Tigers making the statement, starting when Chase Daniel hit Jeremy Maclin for a 58-yard touchdown on the third play of the game. Nebraska answered when Joe Ganz hit Nate Swift for a 20-yard touchdown pass that tied the game. Two more 15-yard penalties against the Huskers allowed Missouri to score on another long drive, making it 14-7. Missouri answered two Nebraska punts with a field goal and touchdown to stretch the lead to 24-7 in the second quarter, and the game essentially ended when Missouri's Brock Christopher intercepted an ill-advised Ganz pass, returning it for a touchdown and a 31-7 lead before halftime. Nebraska managed to kick a field goal with seconds left on the clock to cut the score at the half to 31-10.



*Virginia Tech won by doing what they do best: block punts and create turnovers.*





*2008 was tackle Lydon Murtha's final season, and he was taken in the sixth round of the 2009 NFL Draft.*

Things only got worse in the third quarter. A three-yard punt by Dan Titchener gave the Tigers a short field, and running back Derrick Washington promptly scored to make the score 38–10. The ensuing Nebraska drive deep into Tiger territory stalled after Matt Slauson was called for a personal foul, resulting in no points. A 43-yard Washington touchdown run stretched the Tiger lead to 45–10, then a Quentin Castille fumble set up another Chase Daniel touchdown pass to make the score 52–10 at the end of the third quarter. Missouri pulled their starters and ground out much of the fourth quarter on an eight minute drive without scoring. Inexplicably, Nebraska kept their starters in when they finally got the ball back. As time expired, Joe Ganz connected with Menelik Holt for a 20-yard touchdown for a 52–17 final score. In his post-game press conference, Bo Pelini apologized to the state and to the team for the blowout loss, as Nebraska's defense never stopped Missouri's offense while Chase Daniel was in the game. Missouri would go on to be Big 12 North co-champions and finish 10–4 by winning the Alamo Bowl. Ironically, this game was the high point of the Tigers season, as Missouri would lose the next two and drop out of national title contention.

## NEBRASKA AT TEXAS TECH

The last time Nebraska traveled to Lubbock, Texas Tech rolled to a stunning 60-point victory, winning 70–10. With the memory of giving up 52 points at home against Missouri and facing the potent Red Raider offense, fans were nervous of another embarrassing loss. On Tech's second possession

of the game, Graham Harrell connected with running back Baron Batch for a 27-yard completion, to set up Michael Crabtree's 35-yard touchdown catch off a screen pass. Nebraska responded with a 15-play, 74-yard drive that took eight minutes off the clock and tied the game at 7–7 early in the second quarter. A Batch 49-yard run set up a 26-yard field goal to put Tech ahead again 10–7. Another long Husker drive stalled at the Tech 30 yard line when Quentin Castille was stopped on fourth-and-1, sending Pelini into a fit on the sideline. On the next play, Harrell connected with Edward Britton for 56 yards, setting up a Tech touchdown three plays later (aided by another Nebraska personal foul) for a 17–7 lead. With only a minute left before halftime, Nebraska drove into Tech territory, but Alex Henery's 53-yard field goal was short as time expired.

The Huskers took the opening kick of the second half and embarked on a 14-play drive that stalled at the Tech four yard line, setting up a short Henery field goal to cut the lead to 17–10. Tech sliced through the Husker defense again, and, aided by yet another personal foul penalty by the Huskers, scored on one more Harrell to Crabtree touchdown pass. The Huskers answered with a time-consuming, 13-play drive that included a fake field goal where Jake Wesch passed to Mike McNeill to set up a Ganz quarterback sneak to make the score 24–17. The Husker defense stiffened, forcing the Raiders to punt. Ganz then hit Nate Swift for a 43-yard pass to open the Husker drive and connected with Dreu Young to tie the game at 24–24 with six minutes left. Nebraska seemed to stop Tech on their next series, as the Raiders elected to go on fourth-and-5 from their own 36 yard line. It appeared that Tech was hoping to draw the Huskers offsides, but the referees didn't throw a flag. Forced to improvise, Harrell connected with a wide-open Crabtree for a 47-yard reception that set up a Harrell quarterback sneak to put Tech ahead 31–24 with 2:21 left. But Nebraska wasn't done, as Ganz completed all six of his passes on the ensuing drive, tying the game at 31–31 on a 17-yarder to Todd Peterson with 29 seconds left.

Baron Batch caught a 24-yard screen pass to open overtime, setting up a short touchdown run to put the Raiders up 37–31. Nebraska blocked the extra point, giving the Huskers a great opportunity to end the game on the next possession. The Raider defense turned up the pressure on Ganz, and Jamal Wall picked him off as he tried to throw the ball away. A valiant effort by the Huskers came up short once again, as



the team committed too many errors. Tech would go on to finish 11–2 and lose to Ole Miss in the Cotton Bowl.

### NEBRASKA AT IOWA STATE

Another road trip awaited the Huskers; this time, a bus ride to Ames to play Iowa State. Nebraska fumbled the ball three times on their opening possession, recovering the first two before Iowa State pounced on a Ganz fumble at midfield. The defense forced the Cyclones to punt after three plays, and the Husker offense scored on a 92-yard, nine-play touchdown drive, with Nate Swift accounting for the final 64 yards of the drive on a reverse and three receptions. Midway through the second quarter, the Huskers finished off another long drive, going 85 yards in 11 plays, capped by a 15-yard Marlon Lucky touchdown run to make the score 14–0. After another Cyclone punt, the Huskers completed long passes to Roy Helu (27 yards) and Swift (20 and 14 yards) to set up another touchdown run by Lucky, who this time lined up at quarterback in the shotgun in the trendy “Wildcat” formation, to make the score 21–0. The Cyclones punted to set Nebraska up in scoring position again just before halftime, but Menelik Holt fumbled at the Iowa State 19 yard line to end the half.

On the second play after halftime, Iowa State’s Alexander Robinson took advantage of a Matt O’Hanlon miscue to go 67 yards to cut the Husker lead to 21–7. The ensuing Husker drive stalled when offensive tackle Lydon Murtha stood idly by as Iowa State defensive end Kurtis Taylor sacked Ganz. Both offenses bogged down at that point, exchanging five punts until Iowa State moved the ball into Nebraska territory. The drive ended when Pierre Allen stripped Cyclone tight end Derrick Catlett after a nine-yard reception. After an excessively long review by the officials (long enough to allow the public address announcer to play Bon Jovi’s “Living on a Prayer” in its entirety), Todd Peterson promptly fumbled the ball back to Iowa State on the next play. Iowa State drove briefly into the red zone, but the drive ended when kicker Grant Mahoney shanked a 40-yard field goal attempt into the Iowa State band seated in the corner bleachers.

The Husker offense got a second chance when Rickey Thenarse drilled Iowa State punt returner Devin McDowell, forcing a fumble that Niles Paul recovered. The Husker offense finally got on track, with Joe Ganz scoring on a one-yard run to make the score 28–7 midway through the fourth quarter. After yet another Iowa State punt, Roy Helu



*Marlon Lucky's 2008 season didn't go the way he wanted after setting a single-season reception record in 2007.*

gashed through the Cyclone defense for a 50-yard run, then combined with Quentin Castille to complete an 80-yard touchdown drive to make the final 35–7. Iowa State would go on lose their final 10 games of the season, with coach Gene Chizik resigning to become the head coach of Auburn.

### BAYLOR AT NEBRASKA

Since the creation of the Big 12 conference, Baylor has lost 74% of the time in football, but was showing signs of life under new Head Coach Art Briles. After an early exchange of punts, Nebraska took over in Baylor territory, and, keyed by a couple of Marlon Lucky runs, opened the scoring on a touchdown pass to Ryan Hill. Two plays later, linebacker Cody Glenn hit Bears quarterback Robert Griffin just after he had scrambled out of bounds, getting a personal foul penalty and turning a potential third-and-5 situation into a first down in Nebraska territory. Missed assignments allowed Bears running back Jay Finley to easily score on a 43-yard run, tying the game at 7–7. Nebraska punted on their next series, pinning Baylor on their own four yard line. Griffin started the Bears' next drive with a 40-yard run, and finished it with a 47-yard touchdown to give the Bears a 14–7 lead. Both teams exchanged punts early in the second quarter, then Nebraska began moving the ball with a short passing attack featuring the wide receiver screen, leading to a 27-yard Alex Henery field goal to cut the score to 14–10. A defensive stand on Baylor's next possession gave the Huskers the ball in Bear territory, setting up a Marlon Lucky 18-yard touchdown run to give Nebraska a 17–14 lead. Late in the second quarter,



Cody Glenn sacked Griffin to set up a long third down, but once again was called for a personal foul, giving the Bears a first down near midfield. Griffin then completed two passes to set up a one-yard touchdown run just before halftime. Ndamukong Suh blocked the extra point attempt to hold the halftime score at 20–17 in favor of Baylor.

Baylor's opening possession of the second half went nowhere, setting up a short Husker drive that stalled at the Baylor 35 yard line and resulted in no points as Henery's 52-yard field goal attempt was blocked. Three plays later, Griffin burned the confused Husker secondary again on a 44-yard pass to Kendall Wright to set up first-and-goal at the Nebraska seven. The Bears failed to score, though, as Zach Potter appeared to deflect a 19-yard field goal attempt. Nebraska responded with a 12-play drive featuring short passes and screens to wide receivers, ending with a nine-yard Nate Swift touchdown reception to give the Huskers a 24–20 lead. That touchdown was Swift's 144th career reception, moving him past Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Rodgers on the all-time receptions list at Nebraska. On the ensuing drive, a Nate Swift 54-yard punt return was negated by a roughing the punter penalty on Will Henry to start the fourth quarter. Baylor reached the NU 31 yard line before Robert Griffin was sacked by Larry Asante and Ndamukong Suh on fourth down. Ganz and Swift hooked up once again for a 53-yard

touchdown pass shortly thereafter to give the Huskers a 30–20 lead, as Henery missed the extra point.

After the Huskers forced a Baylor punt, Joe Ganz hit Marlon Lucky on a 69-yard screen pass on third-and-16 to move down to the Baylor five yard line. Nebraska fumbled on the next two plays, with Baylor recovering the second to thwart the Husker scoring threat. On the very next play, junior walk-on linebacker Colton Koehler, forced into action due to injuries to Phillip Dillard and Matt Holt, tackled Bears running back Jay Finley for a safety with seven minutes left in the game for a 32–20 Husker victory. The Bears would go on to finish 4–8.

### NEBRASKA AT OKLAHOMA

Oklahoma's offense averaged 50 points a game, good for first nationally. Nebraska quickly realized it firsthand when DeMarco Murray returned the opening kickoff 62 yards, putting the Sooners near midfield after a 15-yard penalty. Two plays later, Sam Bradford completed a 41-yard pass to Ryan Broyles to put Oklahoma into scoring position. Chris Brown then punched in a two-yard touchdown run to put the Sooners up 7–0. On Nebraska's opening play from scrimmage, the Huskers attempted to run the wide receiver screen that had become a bread-and-butter play. But Oklahoma's Dominique Franks recognized the play, and



*Nate Swift finished his career as Nebraska's all-time reception leader, surpassing the great Johnny Rodgers.*





*Todd Peterson began as a walk-on and finished as a key component in the 2008 offense.*

jumped the route even before the ball left Joe Ganz's hand. Franks picked off the pass, easily ran into the end zone, and four seconds later, the score was 14-0. Two plays later, Dreu Young fumbled a Ganz pass, and the Sooner offense was back on the field, setting up a 48-yard Bradford touchdown pass to a wide-open Quentin Chaney. After a Marlon Lucky three-yard run, Ganz overthrew Lucky, and OU's Lendy Holmes returned the interception to the Nebraska nine, setting up another Bradford touchdown strike, this time to tight end Jermaine Gresham. Six minutes into the game, Nebraska had run five plays for three turnovers and a 28-0 deficit. Just before the end of the first quarter, Oklahoma finished off a 10-play, 97-yard drive to widen the lead to 35-0. The first quarter reminded Husker fans of the meltdowns in the 2007 season, something they had felt would not happen under a new coaching staff.

In the second quarter, Nebraska's offense finally got out of neutral (*Editor's Note: maybe "implode" would be a better description?*). Ganz connected with Nate Swift for a 67-yard reception to set up a Quentin Castille two-yard touchdown run to get the Huskers on the board at 35-7. Oklahoma responded quickly with a touchdown drive aided by a personal foul by Prince Amukamara. Roy Helu entered the game to replace an injured Marlon Lucky, scoring on a 14-yard run to make the score 42-14. But Murray broke yet another long kickoff return, and then scored to make it 49-14 at the half.

Helu sprinted 41 yards on the opening play of the second half to set up a Swift touchdown catch to cut the Sooner lead to 49-21. But once again, OU answered, with the help of another Husker personal foul (this time on Rickey Thenarse), as Gresham caught an 11-yard touchdown to go up 56-21. After a Nebraska punt, Oklahoma drove to the Nebraska 10 yard line where Thenarse picked off a Bradford pass. Quentin Castille fumbled the ball back to the Sooners on the next play, and when Murray caught a Bradford pass and raced into the end zone, it was 62-21 at the end of the third quarter. Both teams substituted freely from that point on, with Husker backup quarterback Patrick Witt scoring on a rollout with 21 seconds left to make the final 62-28. Bradford would go on to win the Heisman Trophy, leading the Sooners to the Big 12 championship, and the BCS National Championship Game, where they lost to Florida 24-14. The Sooners being that good mitigated the pain of the blowout loss slightly, but fans were still concerned about how improved the Huskers really were compared to the previous season.

## KANSAS AT NEBRASKA

Kansas came to Lincoln hoping to prove that 2007's "Rout 76" was no fluke. After an early exchange of punts, all three Husker running backs drove Nebraska downfield, starting with Roy Helu's 17-yard reception. Quentin Castille had 15- and 18-yard gains on the option surrounding a 17-yard reception to get the ball inside the Kansas 10 yard line. Marlon Lucky then entered the game at quarterback in the "joker" formation, gaining five yards on a trap play, then hitting a wide open Mike McNeill on a Tim Tebow-esque jump pass in the end zone.

Kansas quarterback Todd Reesing found Dezmon Briscoe who made a great catch for a 40-yard gain. Husker cornerback Eric Hagg pressured Reesing on a rollout, but went for the highlight reel hit instead of wrapping him up. Instead of going down for a sack, Reesing simply bounced off Hagg and threw to a wide open Kerry Meier to tie the game at 7-7 at the end of the first quarter.

Midway through the second quarter, Reesing connected with Briscoe again, taking advantage of more miscues in the secondary to take a 14-7 lead on a 53-yard touchdown. The Huskers responded with their own passing game, as Ganz completed passes to Todd Peterson and Nate Swift before finding Chris Brooks wide open over the middle for a 25-yard touchdown, tying the score at 14-14 at halftime.

Nate Swift's 47-yard punt return after the Jayhawks' opening possession of the third quarter set up an Alex Henery 35-yard field goal to put NU ahead 17-14. Kansas punted once again, but Swift fumbled the ball back to the Jayhawks. Reesing connected with Dexter Fields on an option pass for



an 11-yard touchdown and the Jayhawks took a 21-17 lead. Nebraska answered with a 10-yard Roy Helu run and leap into the end zone to take the lead back, 24-21, at the end of the third quarter. On the first play of the fourth quarter, Tyler Wortman snuffed out a Kansas reverse, tackling Kerry Meier for a seven-yard loss to force a Jayhawk punt. On the next play, Roy Helu sprinted off right tackle on the zone read for a 52-yard touchdown to widen the lead to 31-21. Kansas responded with their best drive of the day, going 80 yards in nine plays to cut the lead to 31-28 with a seven-yard Jake Sharp touchdown run. Ganz responded with big pass completions to Helu and Swift to set up a Husker scoring threat. Ndamukong Suh entered the game as a blocking fullback, and then caught a short touchdown pass from Ganz for a 38-28 Nebraska lead. Zach Potter intercepted Reesing on the next play, posting up like a power forward on the basketball court to snare the pass. When the Husker drive stalled, Pelini borrowed a fake field goal play from his days at LSU, with Jake Wesch flipping the ball over his shoulder to Alex Henery, who sprinted nine yards for a first down. Ganz found Nate Swift for a 14-yard touchdown to widen the lead to 45-28. Reesing responded by leading Kansas back down the field, scrambling for a 14-yard touchdown with two minutes left to make the score 45-35. Kansas recovered the onside kick, but Pierre Allen sacked Reesing to nullify the final Jayhawk threat.

Three days after the Kansas game, Bo Pelini finally awarded the Blackshirts to the defense for their performance. Hours after that, Cody Glenn was suspended indefinitely for violating team rules. The "indefinite" suspension was never lifted, as the undisclosed infraction ended Glenn's playing career at Nebraska. Kansas finished the season 8-5, beating Minnesota 42-21 in the Insight Bowl.

### NEBRASKA AT KANSAS STATE

Kansas State fired coach Ron Prince two weeks earlier, meaning the meeting with Nebraska was Prince's last home game. On the Huskers' opening possession, Joe Ganz threw well behind Nate Swift, who could only get a finger on the ball. The pass deflected to cornerback Courtney Herndon, who returned the interception 57 yards for a 7-0 Wildcat lead. Nebraska answered with a nine-play, 73-yard drive, ending with Roy Helu following a Ndamukong Suh block into the end zone to tie the game at 7-7. After a Kansas State punt,



*The Husker defense played more like Blackshirts towards the end of the season, as Nebraska won six of their last seven games.*

Nebraska scored on another long drive, with Quentin Castille bouncing outside on fourth-and-inches for a 37-yard touchdown run. Wildcat quarterback Josh Freeman then threw a perfect, 63-yard strike to Ernie Pierce, who scored despite decent coverage from Anthony West.

Nebraska's next drive stalled after Nate Swift was called for offensive pass interference. Prince Amukamara stripped KSU's Deon Murphy on the ensuing punt return to regain possession. Roy Helu sprinted 24 yards for a touchdown to give Nebraska a 21-14 lead. The Blackshirts then put the pressure on Freeman, with sacks by Mathew May and Zach Potter forcing a punt. Swift's punt return to the Wildcat 35 set up another short drive that started and ended with Ganz completions to Todd Peterson making the score 28-14 midway through the second quarter. Making matters worse for State, Freeman suffered an apparent concussion when Ndamukong Suh chased him down for a 15-yard sack. Then, late in the second quarter, Ganz hit Mike McNeill for an 18-yard touchdown pass for a 35-14 halftime lead.

Nebraska came out sluggish in the third quarter, punting on their first two possessions. Kansas State wasn't much better, with Rickey Thenarse finally knocking Freeman out of the game on a 14-yard sack. Carson Coffman replaced Freeman, and KSU's offense began to roll as he found Deon Murphy for a 51-yard gain to set up a Coffman one-yard touchdown run to pull within 35-21. Ganz responded on the next drive, carrying the ball five times and passing twice, scoring on a 25-yard run to increase the lead to 42-21 at the start of the fourth quarter. KSU's Brandon Banks returned the ensuing kickoff 98 yards to





*Husker fans can look forward to seeing Jared Crick (94) and Pierre Allen (95) make big plays as part of the starting defense in 2009.*

cut the lead back to two touchdowns. Ganz lead another drive downfield, scoring on a 14-yard run to make the score 49–28. Late in the fourth quarter, Marcus Mendoza scored a 31-yard touchdown run, capping the scoring at 56–28. Kansas State finished the season 5–7, and brought back Bill Snyder as head coach.

## COLORADO AT NEBRASKA

Colorado went to Lincoln needing a win to become bowl eligible, and came out firing right from the start. On the second play of the game, CU quarterback Cody Hawkins hit a wide-open Riar Greer for a 68-yard touchdown. After the Huskers punted on their first series, Hawkins hit Josh Smith for a 44-yard gain, then Demetrius Sumler scampered 36 yards to the end zone to make the score 14–0 after just four offensive plays for the Buffs. Roy Helu finally got the Husker offense going with some power runs and a reception putting Nebraska in position for Joe Ganz to hit Nate Swift for a two-yard touchdown. That gave Pelini time to make some adjustments on defense, and it showed on CU's next drive as pressure by Zach Potter, Ndamukong Suh, and Rickey Thenarse forced a punt after three plays. On the next play, Ganz hit Mike McNeill for a 53-yard touchdown to tie the game at 14. Tyler Wortman intercepted a Hawkins pass in CU territory, setting up an Alex Henery 35-yard field goal to put NU ahead 17–14 early in the second quarter.

A long kickoff return by CU's Josh Smith set the Buffs up in NU territory, but they could only manage a 37-yard field goal to tie the game at 17–17. Helu led the Huskers

back down the field again, then gave way to Quentin Castille who finished the drive with a one-yard touchdown run to retake the lead, 24–17. The Huskers surprised CU with a pooch kickoff, and the upback fumbled the ball back to Nebraska. Two Ganz incompletions forced the Huskers to line up for a 50-yard field goal attempt. However, Pelini called another variation of the fake field goal play the Huskers ran against Kansas, but this time it backfired. CU's Jimmy Smith recognized it, intercepted the pitch from holder Jake Wesch, and scored easily to tie the game at 24–24 just before halftime. The variation was designed for Henery to throw a pass, but when the intended receiver failed to block Smith, disaster ensued.

In the second half, Roy Helu again lead the Huskers down the field, hurdling Buffs in his wake to set up a 27-yard field goal to

regain the lead at 27–24. Colorado responded with a 65-yard drive to take the lead back, 31–27, on a four-yard Sumler touchdown run. Nebraska answered with a 14-play drive that ended when Joe Ganz fumbled at the Colorado five yard line. The Blackshirts forced a punt, and Swift's punt return put NU in scoring territory. The Buffs stopped Quentin Castille on third-and-1, but Henery kicked a 37-yard field goal to cut the CU lead to one, 31–30, midway through the fourth quarter. The Blackshirts forced another Colorado punt, and Helu scampered into scoring range on 16- and 25-yard runs. On second-and-10, Ganz tried to roll out, but was pressured and sacked for a 15-yard loss back to the 40 yard line. The third down pass fell incomplete, setting up fourth-and-25 from the CU 40 with just two minutes remaining in the game. Nebraska called its second timeout to consider the options, and Alex Henery trotted on the field. In an eerily silent Memorial Stadium, Henery attempted a school-record, 57-yard field goal. As the kick sailed through the uprights to put the Huskers ahead 33–31, the crowd exploded, releasing all of the pent-up anxiety over a game in which the Huskers appeared to be looking for ways to lose. With 1:43 left, the Buffaloes still had an opportunity to come back, but that hope ended when Zach Potter deflected a Hawkins pass into the hands of Ndamukong Suh. On the return, Suh steamrolled over and through Hawkins' weak attempt of a tackle, en route to the end zone to make the final score 40–31. Larry Asante finally ended the game, intercepting a desperation Hawkins throw to end the Buffaloes' season with a 5–7 record.



## GATOR BOWL: NEBRASKA VS. CLEMSON

Surprisingly, the Huskers had never been invited to the Gator Bowl, despite the history of both in the postseason. The New Year's Day bowl between 7–5 Clemson and the 8–4 Huskers started off as a defensive struggle, as the teams combined for just four first downs and five punts in the first quarter. The lone offensive highlight of the opening quarter was Clemson's Cullen Harper finding Jacoby Ford on third-and-17 from the Clemson three. Ford broke a Rickey Thenarse tackle at the 10 yard line and raced to midfield before being brought down. The Clemson drive stalled when James Davis was stuffed for no gain on fourth-and-1 at the NU 32.

Early in the second quarter, Clemson drove deep into Nebraska territory, but Ndamukong Suh blocked a 20-yard field goal to keep the game scoreless. Both teams exchanged punts four more times, until disaster struck for the Huskers. Clemson's DeAndre McDaniel broke into the backfield and picked off a zone-read pitch, returning it for the opening touchdown of the game.



*Quentin Castille's best game of the season came against Clemson in the Gator Bowl when he gained a career-high 125 yards on 18 carries.*

The Huskers answered with an 11-play drive that resulted in a 48-yard Alex Henery field goal to cut the lead to 7–3 with a minute until halftime. Ty Steinkuhler tipped Harper's first down pass and Anthony West intercepted the wobbling ball to set the Huskers up deep in Clemson territory. But Joe Ganz immediately returned the favor, throwing an interception to Clemson's Crezdon Butler, who returned it 59 yards. Suh sacked Harper, but on the next play Harper found Aaron Kelly, who made a diving catch in the end zone to put the Tigers up 14–3 at halftime.

Nebraska's offense came out firing after halftime, as Ganz and Nate Swift connected for a 17-yard touchdown early in the third quarter to cut the deficit to 14–10. Clemson punted on their next possession, but Niles Paul fumbled the punt back to the Tigers. Clemson took advantage of the Husker miscue, as Harper connected with Jacoby Ford for a 41-yard touchdown to extend the Tiger lead to 21–10. On the next drive, though, Quentin Castille, who was handling most of the workload at I-back due to injuries to Roy Helu and Marlon Lucky, burst through the Tiger defense for a 58-yard run to set up a 17-yard Todd Peterson touchdown catch to cut the Tiger lead to four, 21–17. Clemson attempted to answer on their next drive, but Harper misfired on a screen pass. The ball bounced off of Ford's shoulder pads straight up into the air, landing in Blake Lawrence's hands for an easy interception. Clemson's defense held, and Henery converted a 28-yard field goal to cut the lead to 21–20. The Husker defense held the Tigers once again, and Thenarse blocked the punt to give Nebraska great field position. Another Henery field goal, this time from 28 yards, put the Huskers in front 23–21 at the end of the third quarter.



*Matt Slason played his final season for Nebraska in 2008. Slason was a steady performer at right guard, starting all 13 games.*



Early in the fourth, Ganz was knocked out of the game briefly, sending backup quarterback Patrick Witt into the game. On the ensuing play, Witt scrambled for four yards, but was stripped of the ball. Clemson's Byron Maxwell returned the fumble for an apparent touchdown. A lengthy review showed that both of Witt's knees were down before the ball was forced loose, and Nebraska retained possession and punted. Clemson's offense struggled again, and was forced to punt. Ganz returned to the game, but the Huskers were unable to capitalize after a 20-yard completion to Castille. After another exchange of punts, Castille rumbled for 40 yards to the Clemson nine, setting up another Henery field goal to extend the lead to 26–21. Clemson finally mounted a drive in the waning minutes of the game, getting as far as the Nebraska 10 yard line. But, a blitzing Eric Hagg leaped to deflect a first down pass, then sacked Harper on second down for a 16-yard loss. Matt O'Hanlon broke up a pass intended for C.J. Harper in the end zone on third down. On fourth down, Pierre Allen collapsed the pocket and forced Harper to throw wildly incomplete to end the game.

## SEASON WRAPUP

Although the progress was slower than many fans would have liked, Nebraska's 9–4 record in 2008 represented genuine improvement from the disaster that was 2007. In fact, it was a genuine improvement over the previous four years, as it was



*MVP Joe Ganz with the Gator Bowl Trophy—  
a great way to end a Husker career.*



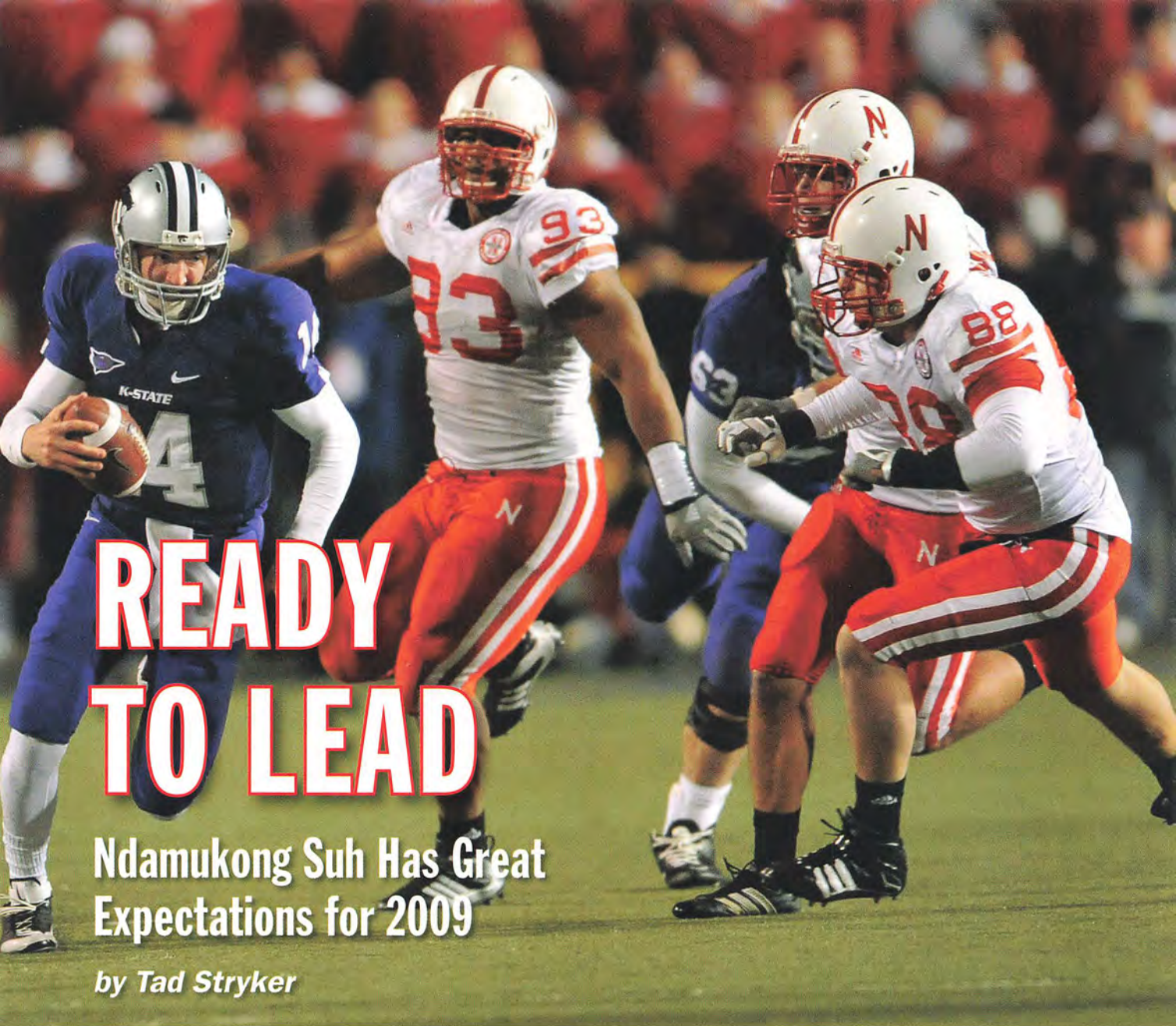
*Bo Pelini made as many strides as a first-year head coach as his team did on the field.*

Nebraska's best record since most of Frank Solich's coaching staff was dismissed after the 2003 season. The blowout losses against Missouri and Oklahoma raised serious concerns, but Nebraska's strong finish to the season in November and the Gator Bowl raised the optimism of all fans. Emerging stars such as Ndamukong Suh, Roy Helu, Quentin Castille, and Mike McNeill give fans reasons for optimism for 2009, even though Joe Ganz, Nate Swift, Todd Peterson, Zach Potter, and Ty Steinkuhler have moved on. Athletic Director Tom Osborne noted the progress by giving Bo Pelini a contract extension that increased his salary from \$1.1 million to \$1.85 million annually. "When you compare Bo's performance and experience with other coaches, he was certainly deserving of a significant salary increase," Osborne said in a university press release announcing the new contract. "We made significant progress in one year under Bo's leadership and we are confident he has our program moving in the right direction."

"Significant" might understate the improvement. In 2007, Nebraska lost six of their final seven games, giving up 172 points in the final three games. In 2008, Nebraska won six of their final seven games and only gave up 115 points in the final four games. Did 2008 represent the ideal for Nebraska football? Hardly. What 2008 represented was the first step in restoring Nebraska football back to national relevance. For many Cornhusker fans, that was just fine after what they had just endured under the Callahan-Pederson regime. **MSP**

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# READY TO LEAD

## Ndamukong Suh Has Great Expectations for 2009

*by Tad Stryker*

**N**damukong Suh is more comfortable being the face of the Nebraska football team on the field than off, but this fall, he'll assume both roles.

Hey, it's just one more thing to do. It's not as though he can't add it to his list of responsibilities, which include stuffing the opponent's ball carriers and stalking its quarterbacks, blocking kicks, and occasionally lining up at fullback. In fact, he got off to a good start on his media responsibilities as a junior, answering questions cogently and confidently. By the end of the season, he handled interviews seemingly without effort. This past spring, he was being asked to comment on multiple aspects of the Nebraska team, including the offense.

So comfortable is Suh that he'll travel to Dallas with coach Bo Pelini to take part in the Big 12 Conference media days late in July. The 6'4", 300-pound senior will be a regular

feature at weekly press conferences in Memorial Stadium. Chances are, you'll see plenty of Suh footage on national and regional telecasts. If not, Husker football fans with high expectations are in for a long season.

There are definitely challenges ahead for Nebraska. Replacing highly-productive Joe Ganz at quarterback will be difficult, and finding 125 receptions and 14 touchdowns to make up for wide receivers Nate Swift and Todd Peterson leaving is no sure thing either. But the biggest question mark in the Husker program is painted on the defensive side of the ball, and Suh is planted squarely in the middle of the defense.

For the first time in a long time, the Nebraska defense has some momentum on its side after the Cornhuskers' 26–21 win over Clemson this past New Year's Day in what was arguably the best defensive effort by any Big 12 bowl team (210 total yards, two touchdowns allowed).





*Defensive end Pierre Allen should help Suh create a defensive line that's the best in the Big 12 this season.*

Nebraska used its first January bowl victory in nine years to cap off a 9½ season, a campaign seen by many as the humble beginnings of redemption for the Husker football program.

"That was a big thing, getting back on track," Suh said. "It was a great game to go to, the Gator Bowl, but obviously, if we'd had our choice, we'd have played in the Big 12 Championship Game and the Fiesta Bowl. But you can't just go right to things; there's a process you have to go through."

Is a more intense Husker football revival in store for this fall? If so, the defense will have to continue its upward trend (it finished 112th in total defense in 2007 but jumped to 67th in 2008). One of Suh's biggest challenges in 2009 will be making the Blackshirts a household word around the college football world once again, while facing double-team blocking most of the time. But Suh would be the first to tell you that he'll have a lot of help with that chore.

His old partner at defensive tackle, Ty Steinkuhler, has graduated, but Suh is excited about lining up this fall with other guys he's familiar with.

There's senior defensive end Barry Turner, a hotshot, pass-rushing 2005 Freshman All-American who faded along with the rest of the defense in 2007. Turner broke his leg in the second game last fall, and was granted a medical redshirt. There's junior defensive end Pierre Allen, who stepped in for Turner and started the last 11 games of the season, finishing third on the team in tackles-for-loss and sacks. There are

sophomore defensive tackles Terrence Moore and Jared Crick, who were backups as the Huskers came all the way back to second in total defense in the conference. And there's redshirt freshman Baker Steinkuhler.

"I had the luxury of playing with Ty's little brother in the spring game," said Suh. "Everything went well. It was like playing with his older brother again."

Suh says that opposing offenses won't be able to consistently get away with double-teaming him this fall.

"During our spring ball, I saw a lot of double teams from our offensive line," Suh said. "I'm expecting it, but, the way we run our defense, it's really hard to single out on one guy, because if you do that, the other guys up there with me will have you."

In the heat of the summer, Suh is thinking about the Blackshirts. It's a name that lost a lot of its meaning during 2007, at the end of the Bill Callahan era. That was the year that opponents exacted revenge on Nebraska for decades of dominance, the year that a promising young defensive line—including sophomore Ndamukong Suh—was sliced and diced and a once-solid linebacking corps disintegrated while Callahan and defensive coordinator Kevin Cosgrove watched from the sidelines.

College football fans still remember Nebraska losing games in 2007 by video-game scores like 65–51 and 76–39. That was a lost year, as far as Suh is concerned.

"I'd always had expectations going to Nebraska that we'd always be in a bowl game every year, playing whatever, Gator, Cotton, or BCS bowl or the national championship game," he said.

Defensive coordinator Carl Pelini, who also serves as defensive line coach, has been pivotal in turning the Nebraska defense around, according to Suh.

"He's had a tremendous impression on me, and really gotten the most out of me out of all my coaches," Suh said. "The way he goes about our day-to-day routine is one of the biggest reasons why we've had great success in the past season. He's definitely great at explaining why we're doing something and how it will work. He works for each person. He doesn't give out specific rules for everybody to follow. Everybody is a little different and you've got to tweak their technique so it fits them and fits within the scheme of what we're trying to get done. I think that's why each player has blossomed so much."

Having come partway to the place where he wants his team to be, Suh has one more shot at imposing his expectations on the rest of the Big 12. He's got a lot riding on this fall, not the least of which is positioning himself to be a high first-round pick in the NFL Draft next April. But that's not exactly at the top of his priority list right now.



"Big Suh," as Pelini calls him, could be NFL property right now. He had a breakout season in 2008, making 76 tackles, including 19 for losses, and 7.5 sacks. His 5.8 tackles per game led every other Big 12 defensive lineman by a wide margin. He led the Huskers in tackles, the first time an interior lineman had done that since Tom Osborne's first year as head coach.

He could have skipped his senior year and cashed his first big NFL paycheck by now. He decided in January to finish his eligibility at Nebraska, largely motivated by his close-knit family (his mother, an elementary school teacher in Portland, OR, wants him to get his college degree).

It's not just finishing school that motivates Suh, who is on track to graduate in December with a degree in construction management. He wants to restore Nebraska to what he sees as its rightful place in the college football world. So he's out to raise the standards that have slipped in Lincoln, which has not celebrated a Big 12 championship in 10 years.

"Our overall team goal is, on the field, to have flawless play," said Suh. "It won't always happen, but you can work for perfection. Going 14-0, and accomplishing our goals of winning the Big 12 North, winning the Big 12 Championship Game, then in January, going to the national championship or the Fiesta Bowl—that's what we want to do. Off the field, having good grades, and having no off-the-field incidents. We're a school that prides ourselves on having good academics. My personal goals will come along with us achieving all those team goals."

Those are some hefty goals, considering that you won't find Nebraska in the top ten in any national pre-season poll. Suh will need a lot of help from an untested group of redshirt freshmen in the Huskers' back seven if the Nebraska defense is to rise to heights not seen since the days of Grant Wistrom—another Husker who could have skipped his senior season to go pro, but didn't.

Now it's up to Suh and his classmates to provide the same type of leadership that enabled the Huskers to turn things around last year.

"I'm really proud of the team, that we stuck together," said Suh, who acknowledged that the team "could have easily fallen apart" after a 3-3 start,

including a 52-17 blowout loss to Missouri. Instead, the Huskers came back to win six of their last seven games.

"I think the senior leadership really stepped in. I think they opened everybody's eyes, saying, 'We can be a great, great team as long as we come together and eliminate our mistakes.' The big thing was that we were making mistakes that hurt ourselves," Suh said.

"Senior leadership last year was probably the biggest and most influential thing that got us to have a good season," he continued. "Those guys wanted to leave a legacy and I think those guys accomplished that. Obviously, we can go back and look at certain games where we could have done a better job, but they did a tremendous job getting the program back to where the expectations were. Nebraska's always been known as a top program in college football, and that's why I went there."

By his own admission, Suh is not a verbal leader in the mold of a Christian Peter or a Broderick Thomas, but his teammates look to him for leadership and appointed him to the 14-member Unity Council for the last half of his junior season. When he speaks, people stop and listen.

"Me personally, I think since I'm a low-key type of person, I'm more of a leader by example," Suh said. "I do the right thing and have people follow in my footsteps, so they can see the right way to get things done."

"In summer conditioning, there's going to be a lot of testing by strength coaches and a lot of pushing, understanding that we want to make strides this summer. Even though we had a great showing in spring ball, we want to make that much more strides through summer conditioning," he explained. "If I have a younger guy come up and run next to me,



*2007, including the 45-14 loss to Oklahoma State, was a season to forget, but it also serves as motivation.*



or if I'm lifting with younger guys, I'll be showing them what to expect. If somebody needs to go get a younger guy who doesn't have a car, those are some of the things I can do."

Those are just a few of the things Suh can do. It's not every day that you see the team's leading tackler line up in the backfield as the lead blocker in goal line situations, but Suh quickly adapted to that assignment when Bo Pelini asked him to learn it a few days before last year's Oklahoma game.

"We worked on that for three practices, then refined it on the last day before we left for Oklahoma. He said, 'Be ready,' and I said, 'I'll be ready if you guys need me.'"

William "The Refrigerator" Perry carried off that assignment well for the 1985 Chicago Bears, and in the Super Bowl even carried the pigskin into the end zone on a dive play. But Suh went the Fridge one better when he slipped out into the flat and caught a two-yard touchdown pass from Ganz against Kansas the week after the OU trip.

Suh is much more than a space-eating lineman. He is not the typical widebody that plugs the middle of defensive lines around the nation. He can get out and move, as his 49-yard interception return for a touchdown against San Jose State and his 30-yard pick and return for the game-clinching score against Colorado will attest.

Will Suh have his hands on the ball once again in 2009?

"If I get called on, I'd be more than excited to go in again and do that," he said. "I love being able to help the team any way I can. That was a lot of fun for me to have that opportunity. It showed that Coach trusted me to even put me in that position."

He can definitely tear down, but the construction management major can also build. Just so he understands defensive coordinator Carl Pelini's concepts better, he has been studying the entire defense and his role in it. Suh is a rare and scary combination of the cerebral and the destructive. How does he explain that paradox?

"I really never have thought about it," he said. "As a kid, I grew up taking apart things and putting them together. When I got a hold of football in the eighth grade, I enjoyed tackling and going after people. I guess both sides of the brain kick in at certain times."

Intense commitment to being the best is a family tradition. Suh's father, Michael, hails from Cameroon, and went on to play professional soccer in Europe. His mother, Bernadette, ran track and played cricket as a high schooler in Jamaica. His sister, Ngum Suh, played soccer at Mississippi State and for the Cameroon national women's team.

"Success is something I expect of myself," said Suh, who was a standout in basketball and track and field at Grant High in Portland. "You'll never see a change in me. I won't be cocky or anything of that sort. I've been



*Opposing teams will find it impossible to block Ndamukong Suh with a single player, but if he's double-teamed it will lead to more opportunities for other defenders.*

brought up in a very humble, hardworking family. That's just the way I am. We expect the best and we're going to work toward the best. We have very high expectations for ourselves. Success is not something we take for granted, but it's something that we expect."

Suh, who has 24 starts, 12 sacks, and 33 tackles-for-loss to his credit after three seasons, carries high expectations—for himself and for the Cornhuskers—through the summer and into the start of fall camp. For the team, which came together late last season, the key is getting off to a good start.

"I felt like it wasn't until after the Virginia Tech game last year that we started coming together as a team," Suh said. "I want that when we play Florida Atlantic. That will be our biggest challenge, coming out of the chute well and then getting better every single game while we're winning."

"The biggest thing I need to improve on my game is honing my technique and making it be second nature to me, not necessarily having to think about it. I want my steps and my hand placement to be always correct. I'm going to try to get it as close as possible. If I can do that, I think I'll have another great year." **MSP**

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# THE PURSUIT OF CHEMISTRY

## Replacing Nate Swift and Todd Peterson

*by Brian Christopherson*

**T**hey came to Lincoln with loads of determination but minimal fanfare. One was an unheralded, three-star recruit from Hutchinson, MN. The other was a walk-on from Grand Island. Neither made the masses jump up and down on signing day, but they'd have them jumping eventually.

Nate Swift and Todd Peterson. Oh, you know them now and smile at their mention. But what about then? Who would have dreamed five years ago that Husker fans would now be saying, "What are we going to do without Nate Swift and Todd Peterson?"

You look at the biggest questions facing the Husker offense in 2009 and none loom larger than this one: How do the Huskers find anything close to the chemistry that they had last year between quarterback Joe Ganz, Swift, and Peterson?

Those three were more than teammates. They were boys. Roommates. Played intramural basketball together.

Nintendo 64 rivals. Not only that, they came up on the scout team together, three guys with chips residing on their shoulders. They knew what the other person was going to do before he did it.

It was chemistry to the definition.

"You could just tell they understood the game and they understood how to get open," Ganz said. "I'd rather have that than a guy who could run a 4.3 [40-yard dash] and jump out of the gym. You knew what you were going to get. You saw it in those guys early on."

So it was. But how is it going to be? Nebraska goes into a new season with a new starting quarterback—likely junior Zac Lee—and a bunch of hungry but unproven wide receivers.

Menelik Holt. Niles Paul. Antonio Bell. Chris Brooks. Curenski Gilleylen. Marcus Mendoza. Will Henry. Wes



Cammack. And Brandon Kinnie, a JUCO recruit who will arrive in the fall.

A lot of names, but little production thus far.

The best stats to anyone's name belong to the senior Holt, but his numbers from last season don't exactly jump off the page. Good, not great: 30 catches for 355 yards and one touchdown.

Holt heard all the talk and read all the stories about the chemistry between Ganz, Swift, and Peterson. He admits it was something special. It's not something just duplicated by snapping your fingers. This isn't like PlayStation. One player doesn't leave and just automatically have his spot filled by someone with the same star rating. It takes a certain amount of trial and error, a lot of growing, a lot of bumps in the road, for a receiver and a quarterback to connect.

"After catching with Joe for three years, I pretty much knew where Joe was going to put the ball every time," Holt said this spring. "I knew the kind of things Joe saw, and I knew when I wasn't going to catch the ball. With Zac, you have to learn, but Zac's been here for a while and we're all kind of used to Zach too. And he's definitely stepped into a leadership role."

But surely there's a pressure to match what Ganz-Swift-Peterson had last year, right? Everyone's talking about it. Surely Lee and his receivers hear it. Holt said the receivers can't worry about that. They just have to play the offense the way they've been taught. Do that and the right things will happen.

"One quarterback can't change our offense," Holt said. "So regardless of [the quarterback], we're supposed to run the same routes, catch the same ball in the same place, block the same way. As far as chemistry-wise, everyone loves Zac. He's one of those guys who's hard not to like. So there's definitely chemistry there."

But is there a receiver ready to lead? Swift became a team leader last year, and so did Peterson. Of course, it's worth noting that both of them are relatively mild-mannered, not owning the type of vocal personalities that often come with those who are locker room leaders.

It was their play that made them leaders. It was their ability to make a catch in the pressure situations. See Swift's magnificent fingertip catch in the corner of the end zone that sparked Nebraska to a comeback win in the Gator Bowl. See Peterson's touchdown grab in the final seconds to send the Texas Tech game to overtime.

It wasn't just that they made plays. They made clutch plays. That's leadership. It's not an easy role to take on, Holt admitted. With this spring just completed, the 6'4", 220-pound senior from San Diego is still adjusting to being a team leader.

"It's a really big opportunity, not only a big opportunity but a big responsibility," Holt said. "There are things

expected of me out of these coaches, and those things I'm trying to fulfill every day. I want to come in and be the hero and lead everybody and hold the torch and those kind of things, but it's harder than it looks. I'm still struggling with that... It's a little bit different having all the pressure put on you. It's just something I'm growing with and getting used to."

Holt doesn't have to do it alone, of course. The junior Paul, an Omaha North grad who has shown glimpses of what he could be but ultimately just has 24 catches in his career, was said by coaches to be having the best spring of any receiver.

But a DUI arrest late in spring gained him a suspension. It's anticipated he'll be back, but it's not known if that suspension will carry into the fall at all. Paul's setback can't be an excuse, Husker receivers coach Ted Gilmore said.

"Every single guy's always one rep away," Gilmore said. "And if somebody can't go for whatever reason, that next guy has got to be ready to step in. He gets coached the same and he sits in the same meeting rooms. So he has to be able to step in and do that same job."

In that respect, the spring game couldn't help but bring a smile to Gilmore's face. It was just a scrimmage, of course. (Granted, it was a scrimmage attended by 77,670 people.) But Gilmore's receivers showed flashes of goodness. They showed that they might be able to make this thing work with Lee and backups Latravis Washington and Cody Green.



*Replacing Todd Peterson has been the talk for months, but in September it will be time to make it happen.*

PHOTO BY GUY WIRE/REUTERS; PHOTO TOP BY AP/WIDE WORLD; PHOTO BOTTOM BY AP/WIDE WORLD





*Joe Ganz started less than two full seasons, yet leaves Nebraska holding 23 school records.*

Senior Chris Brooks, who has caught just three passes in his career, had five receptions for 48 yards and a four-yard touchdown. And Marcus Mendoza, moved from running back to wide receiver this spring, showed off his speed, bringing in three catches for 58 yards, including a 21-yard touchdown.

And perhaps the highlight of the day belonged to true freshman Antonio Bell. The native of Daytona Beach, FL produced a roar from the crowd when he sacrificed his body on a jump-ball catch for 27 yards.

Gilmore, who a year ago heard similar questions about who would step up at receiver with the loss of Maurice Purify, couldn't wipe the satisfaction from his face as he talked about the play of Brooks and Bell.

"Both of the young men caught the ball very well when it was thrown in their direction," Gilmore said. "I told them, 'I'm not doing any coaching, I'm just going to let you play and let you process information and I'm going to see if you help yourself, if you can help each other, and we'll assess it and fix it afterwards.' But I was happy the way they attacked the ball."

The senior Brooks said the freshman Bell is a player to watch. "Wow. He showed me highlights of being a great receiver," Brooks said. "For just being here a couple months, he's turned it up a notch."

Bell and Mendoza are not the biggest of receivers. Bell is just 6'2", 180 pounds, while Mendoza stands 5'10" and weighs 185 pounds. Asked if that lack of size made it difficult for a quarterback to locate those guys, Lee smiled and said: "They're pretty easy to find if they're five yards past their guy."

The spring game sent the team off to summer conditioning on the right note, Lee said. But the quarterback admitted he and the receivers still have some work to do on their chemistry. The summer months, and the seven-on-seven drills that accompany them, will be critical to that.

"It'll be big, just getting in shape, getting stronger, developing more chemistry with everyone as a whole," said Lee, who was 15-18 for 214 yards and three touchdowns in the spring game. "Me especially, with receivers, and tight ends and backs, it's really important. Hopefully everyone just works their butt off."

It will help receivers that Lee possesses many similar attributes to Ganz. Both are capable scramblers, Bo Pelini recently even said that, "I think Zac's probably even a little faster than Joe."

And while the NFL powers-that-be might judge Ganz's arm to not be as strong as some of his peers, offensive coordinator Shawn Watson would tell you Ganz had plenty of arm strength. But, the 6'2", 215-pound Lee might also even have a slight advantage over Ganz there. When competing against other quarterbacks last December to see who could throw the ball the furthest, Lee launched it 75 yards.

But the biggest, and probably most important, commonality between the two quarterbacks is this: They're both hungry to learn about football. And they both have learned or are learning from a coach who won't let them leave the room until they know the answers.

Chemistry between quarterbacks and receivers is often developed from meeting room study as much as it is on those practice days when sweat is stinging your eyes.

Entering this year, Watson told Lee: "Your push has to come from me, and I'm going to coach you hard. And I'm doing this because it's what's best for the team, and it's also what's best for you. I'm doing it because I really care about what you become."

In Watson's room, a quarterback isn't ready unless he knows what every position on the field is doing on each play. That's why Lee spent much of the months leading up to spring football on a grease board diagramming plays, drawing arrows as to where each receiver was going and how their paths might change if the defense came with something unexpected.

"He'd shout something out and I'd have to draw it up just to make sure I know the ins and outs of every play," Lee said.



Senior nose tackle Ndamukong Suh, who has assumed sort of a player spokesman role for the team, said every time he walked past Watson's office this offseason it seemed like Lee was in there.

That, combined with Lee's strong arm and agility, caused Suh to at one point this spring say, "I think once he gets that offense down pat, he'll be just as good, maybe a little bit better than Joe. I feel that he's kind of a perfect fit for what our coaches are looking for. I think it's his job, but the coaches aren't going to give it to him, which I respect. He's going to have to earn it and that's what everybody on this team [has to do]."

But who will be Lee's security blankets? That's what Ganz used to call Swift and Peterson. When Ganz was in a jam, he knew one of those guys would somehow, some way get open and give him a target.

Who is that guy Lee goes to on a third-and-8 with the stadium shaking?

The truth is, it might not even be a wide receiver. It might be a tight end. Junior Mike McNeill leads a tight ends group that seems to be the deepest unit on the team. McNeill is coming off a season in which he caught 32 passes, a season record for a Husker tight end.

This season might have a much different look than last year's when Swift caught 63 balls, Peterson caught 62, and McNeill was next closest with 32. Don't be surprised to see more of an even distribution of receptions in 2009.

Don't be surprised if someone like I-back Roy Helu (who has shown great hands in the spring) is leading many wide receivers in receptions this year. You'll recall that former Husker I-back Marlon Lucky had 75 receptions during the 2007 season to put most receivers to shame.

Guys like McNeill, Dreu Young, Helu, and Quentin Castille could take some pressure off the receivers early in the season while they dip their toes into the water. But ultimately, some playmaker at the wide receiver position is going to have to surface. And while Holt and Paul are popular choices for that role because of their experience, don't discount the idea that a new face could emerge as this team's go-to receiver.

The speed of Bell makes him a candidate. He can stretch the field and has a confidence about him that has impressed coaches.

"He's a big surprise," Watson said. "I mean, we knew he was fast, but we didn't know he was this fast. Not only that, he's instinctual. He's a natural at the position. Natural route runner. Good ball catcher. Physical player. He just needs to grow in our offense."

Within the program there is also optimism that Brandon Kinnie, who will arrive in the fall from Fort Scott (KS) Community College, could make an immediate impact. He is 6'3", 215 pounds and likes to play physical. "A lot of teams



*Huskers fans have a lot of hope that Niles Paul can become a "go-to" guy in 2009.*

want big wideouts now to line up against a little corner, that's very intimidating," Kinnie said.

At this point, no one is about to call this receiver group intimidating. But they said the same things last year after Maurice Purify's eligibility was up. No one thought that group was going to do much either. They ended up doing quite a bit (Swift broke Johnny Rodgers's career receptions record), setting a high bar for this year's quarterback and receivers to try to reach.

That's why, even with spring ball over, Zac Lee is not about to relax. It's time to push now more than ever. The way he sees it, it's on him to take command and light a fire under his receivers.

"During conditioning, I just feel like I have to work as hard as I can every time I'm out there and lead by example," Lee said. "And that way, guys see me out there working hard and hopefully they'll be inspired by it and work hard too."

The thing about chemistry is it doesn't come easy. You have to sweat for it. **MSP**

Brian Christopherson is a University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate in his third year as the Husker football beat writer at the *Lincoln Journal Star*. He covered the 2007 season and lived to tell about it.





# ADJUSTING TO PERSONNEL

## What Does Shawn Watson's Past Say About Nebraska's Offense in 2009?

by Mike Jaixen

**W**ith the graduation of Joe Ganz, Nebraska will be looking at a new starting quarterback in 2009. Historically, a new quarterback starting the season has frequently meant offensive struggles, no matter who the head coach was at the time.

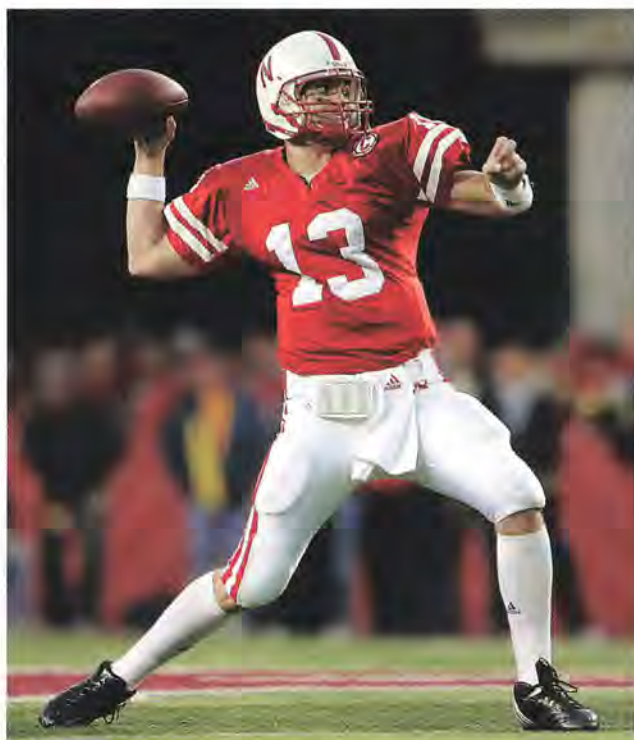
Under Bill Callahan, both sophomore Joe Dailey (2004) and senior Sam Keller (2007) ended up with losing records as starting quarterback. Dailey, a run/pass quarterback struggled with Callahan's attempt to convert him into a pocket passer. Keller, a gunslinger who transferred from Arizona State, struggled with developing the patience to read his receivers. Zac Taylor (2005), a junior college transfer, ended his junior season with a winning record after a rocky first three games where the Blackshirts scored more touchdowns (four) than the offense (three) did.

Under Frank Solich, first year quarterbacks weren't much better. In 2002, junior Jammal Lord, a run-first

quarterback, led the Huskers to a 7-7 record, only one year after the team played in the national championship game. After two blowout losses to Penn State and Iowa State, Solich even considered benching Lord in favor of true freshman Curt Dukes. Injuries in 1998 forced Nebraska to rotate between sophomore Bobby Newcombe, freshman Eric Crouch, and senior Monte Christo as the Huskers went 9-4 on the season. Newcombe would eventually move to wingback, while Crouch won the Heisman Trophy three years later.

Looking back at the Osborne era, Stanford transfer Scott Frost started the 1996 season as a junior and led the Huskers to an 11-2 record. That first loss in 1996, a 19-0 shutout at Arizona State, broke a 26 game winning streak that included two national championships. Fans never warmed up to Frost until he led the Huskers to a national championship in 1997, even booing him earlier that season after sophomore Frankie





*Zac Taylor struggled in his first few outings as a starter and didn't become a record-setting quarterback until his second year.*

London took some first half snaps against Central Florida. Mike Grant twice started seasons as Nebraska's quarterback, but was relegated to the bench in 1990 by junior Mickey Joseph and in 1992 by true freshman Tommie Frazier.

Husker fans might have to look all the way back to 1989 to find a season where an inexperienced quarterback started the season and exceeded expectations. Senior Gerry Gdowski had only played briefly in mop up duty the previous two seasons, but exploded as a starting quarterback, being named co-offensive Big Eight Player of the Year in leading the Huskers to a 10-2 record.

What can fans expect from the next Husker quarterback? After Patrick Witt transferred to Yale, Zac Lee became the expected starter for 2009. The answer to those expectations lies within the background of offensive coordinator Shawn Watson.

Watson's coaching career began in 1982 as a graduate assistant at Southern Illinois, his alma mater, then moved to Illinois in 1983. At Illinois, he coached alongside Bill Callahan as a graduate assistant for two years, then as a full-time assistant for tackles and tight ends in 1985 and wide receivers coach in 1986. Watson then moved to Miami University in Ohio, where he spent three years as tight ends coach, followed by two years as wide receivers coach, then two years coaching quarterbacks in addition to serving as recruiting coordinator.

Watson returned to Southern Illinois as head coach in 1994. In three years at his alma mater, Watson went 11-22. In 1994, the Salukis averaged 31 carries for 99 yards rushing per game versus 31 passes attempted, completing 48%, for 161 yards a game. In 1995, the Salukis rushed 38 times for 140 yards a game while passing 28 times a game, completing 46%, for 166 yards a game. In 1996, rushing increased to 42 carries a game for 184 yards, while attempting 31 passes, completing 54%, for 210 yards a game. In Watson's final season at Southern Illinois, running back Coe Bonner rushed for 1,234 yards, and was named first team all-conference.

After leaving Southern Illinois, Watson joined the staff at Northwestern as quarterbacks coach, and followed Gary Barnett to Colorado in 1999. One year later, Barnett promoted Watson to offensive coordinator. Junior Bobby Pesavento opened that season at quarterback, but was replaced by freshman Craig Ochs after the Buffaloes lost their first three games. Pesavento was a pocket passer, but Ochs was a scrambler. In 2000, the Buffaloes relied on the passing game to move the ball. Their leading rusher was 5'9" junior Cortlen Johnson, who ran for 622 yards and eight touchdowns, while Javon Green (699 yards and four touchdowns) and John Minardi (592 yards and two touchdowns) led the receivers.

When Husker fans think about Colorado in 2001, the numbers 62 and 36, and a bunch of unprintable words come to mind. Craig Ochs opened the season as the starting quarterback, but gave way to Bobby Pesavento in the second half of the season due to injuries. At running back, Chris Brown, Cortlen Johnson, and Bobby Purify shared the load, as the Buffaloes had three games where two backs each rushed for more than 100 yards. The Buffaloes averaged 48 rushes for 229 yards a game while attempting 26 passes, completing 60%, for 206 yards a game. On first down, the emphasis on rushing was even greater, as the Buffs ran the ball 73% of the time. In the passing game, All-American tight end Daniel Graham led the Buffs with 51 catches for 753 yards and six touchdowns. Minardi's season ended in September with a knee injury, thrusting Derek McCoy into action as the Buffs top wide receiver. In the season opening loss to Fresno State, Ochs went 31-51 passing as the Buffaloes went to the air to play catch-up after two fumbles put the Buffs down 14-0 in the first quarter. From there on, the Buffaloes became much more focused on the running game. Brown, who would end up being drafted by the Tennessee Titans in the third round of the 2003 NFL Draft, would have five 100-yard games in 2001. Johnson and Purify both contributed three 100-yard games each. The key to stopping Colorado in 2001 was stopping the run. In their first meeting in Austin, Texas was able to dominate the Buffs by shutting down the running game, and forcing the Buffs to throw the ball. But in the rematch in



the Big XII Championship Game in Dallas, Brown ran for 182 yards and three touchdowns to lead the Buffs to the title. In the Fiesta Bowl, Oregon held Colorado to just 49 yards rushing, and the Ducks rolled to a 38-16 victory.

The Buffaloes went into 2002 expecting to have Craig Ochs start at quarterback, but those plans went awry when Ochs suffered a concussion in the second game of the season. Ochs announced his plans to transfer to Montana a couple of weeks later, thrusting Robert Hodge into the starting role for the rest of the season. Hodge, a 5'11" senior, had played mostly on special teams in 2001, and was considered more dangerous with his legs than with his arm. With that, the tandem of Chris Brown and Bobby Purify became the primary focus of the offense. Brown tallied 1,744 yards and 18 touchdowns, while Purify added 739 yards and three touchdowns. When both Brown and Purify were injured at the end of the season, freshman Brian Calhoun stepped in with 259 yards rushing in the final two games of the season. Rushing statistics of that sort are usually the sign of superior offensive line play. In the seventh round of the ensuing 2003 NFL Draft, the Dallas Cowboys drafted tackle Justin Bates and the New York Giants drafted guard/center Wayne Lucier. Hodges' primary target was Derek McCoy, who caught 41 passes for 643 yards and seven touchdowns.

With Hodge graduating and Ochs transferring, Colorado turned to sophomore Joel Klatt, an in-state walk-on quarterback in 2003. While a new quarterback was nothing new in Watson's career as offensive coordinator, replacing Chris Brown (drafted by the Tennessee Titans) and four offensive linemen was another matter entirely. Klatt's career began with a 402-yard, four-touchdown effort in his debut against in-state rival Colorado State. Klatt injured his shoulder in the third game against Washington State, and didn't start the next two games. Sophomore Erik Greenberg replaced Klatt as the Buffs lost three games before Klatt returned. Bobby Purify only played three games before suffering a season-ending ankle injury, thrusting the rushing load solely onto Brian Calhoun. The loss of Purify made the Buffs more dependent on Klatt's arm than the running game, as the team went from run-first to relying on passing to generate 75% of the yardage. Passing yardage went from 1,907 yards in 2002 to 3,351 yards in 2003; rushing yardage dropped from 3,136 yards in 2002 to just 1,122 yards in 2003. Calhoun rushed for 810 yards and five touchdowns, only topping the 100-yard mark twice in the season. D.J. Hackett emerged as the Buffs top receiver, catching 78 passes for 1,013 yards, and was drafted in the fifth round of the 2004



*It took his second season and a national title before Husker fans fully accepted Scott Frost as a starter.*

NFL Draft by the Seattle Seahawks. Derek McCoy added 63 catches for 883 yards and 11 touchdowns. The Buffaloe's season ended with a 5-7 record with a 31-22 loss to Nebraska in Frank Solich's final game.

Bobby Purify received a medical hardship to regain a year of eligibility in 2004, but Brian Calhoun transferred to Wisconsin in the wake of the Colorado recruiting scandal. Purify rushed for 1,017 yards and nine touchdowns to solidify the running game. Joel Klatt returned to start all 12 games for the Buffaloes, but with the return of Purify, play calling became a 50-50 mix between rushing and passing. Purify's senior season wasn't injury free, as he suffered a shoulder injury in a loss to Missouri that was aggravated against Texas, limiting his availability against Oklahoma State and Kansas. Despite the injury, Purify went on to have five 100-yard rushing games.

In the passing game, Klatt spread the ball between receivers Evan Judge, Ron Monteilh, Blake Mackey, fullback Lawrence Vickers, and tight end Joe Klopfenstein. The balanced attack fizzled in the Big 12 Championship Game, as the Oklahoma Sooners (with Bo Pelini as co-defensive coordinator) held the Buffs to just three first downs and 50 total yards in a 42-3 loss.

With Purify's eligibility over, Hugh Charles claimed the starting running back job in quarterback Joel Klatt's senior season. A 5'8" speed back, Charles produced three 100-yard games in his first four starts, but none in the final nine games



of the season, accounting for 842 yards and six touchdowns. The balance between rushing and passing remained similar, though productivity in the passing game increased from the year before, as Klatt completed over 60% of his passes for 2,696 yards. Receivers Evan Judge and Dusty Sprague lead the Buffs in receiving with 43 and 40 receptions respectively. Offensive productivity completely evaporated towards the end of the season once the Buffs clinched the Big 12 North title. In the final two games of the regular season, Colorado was outscored 100–6 by Nebraska and Texas, leading to the dismissal of Gary Barnett. Watson then moved to Lincoln to join the Husker coaching staff.

Two observations of Watson's background become clear as you study the record. Watson likes a strong running game with solid tight ends to throw to. The Buffaloes offense was most potent with Chris Brown and Bobby Purify at running back, producing three Big 12 North titles. Tight ends Daniel Graham, Joe Klopfenstein, and Quinn Sypniewski were drafted by the NFL.

Experience at quarterback was not an indicator of success for Watson at Colorado. The Buffs won the Big 12 rotating between Craig Ochs and Bobby Pesavento in 2001, as well as with senior Robert Hodge replacing Ochs early in the 2002 season. When Watson finally had a solid three-year starter at quarterback in Joel Klatt, it resulted in the end of Gary Barnett and Watson's careers in Boulder.

What's the implication for Nebraska in 2009? Zac Lee seems to fit the Ochs model of being a mobile quarterback with a solid arm. LaTravis Washington surprised fans in the

spring game by showing an accurate and extremely powerful arm, and could be compared to Robert Hodge. But it's clear that it's not the quarterback that drives a Watson offense, but rather the running backs. Roy Helu Jr. looks like a budding star who could become the centerpiece of the Husker rushing attack. As a backup last season, Helu rushed for 803 yards and averaged 6.4 yards a carry. If Helu's performance over the last four games of 2008 is any indication, he could be Nebraska's best I-back since Ahman Green during the national championship years. In the offseason, Helu added 15 pounds of muscle and reported to spring ball faster and more powerful than ever, raising eyebrows as to his potential. Quentin Castille is a powerful back who put on an impressive performance in the Gator Bowl, rushing for 125 yards due to injuries to both Helu and Marlon Lucky.

Nebraska's roster of tight ends is deeper than it's ever been. Mike McNeill evolved into a threat in the latter parts of the 2008 season, catching 32 passes for 442 yards and six touchdowns. Dreu Young became an integral part of the running game last season, but added nine catches for 140 yards and a touchdown. Redshirt freshmen Ben Cotton and Kyler Reed impressed in the spring game to add even more depth to a critical position in a Watson-coached offense.

Looking back at Watson's Colorado teams, the comparisons between the 2001 Buffaloes and the 2009 Huskers on offense is obvious. Helu and Castille seem to compare well with Chris Brown and Bobby Purify, and Nebraska's tight end depth looks much deeper than the 2001 Buffaloes. If those comparisons hold into this upcoming season, Zac Lee merely needs to be serviceable to compare favorably to the tag team of Craig Ochs and Bobby Pesavento. Lee likely has better speed and a better arm than either Ochs or Pesavento—the question with Lee is whether he can lead the team. The Buffs in 2001 depended on the running game to lead the offense, and if that holds true for the Huskers, it will take the pressure off of Lee to produce in 2009.

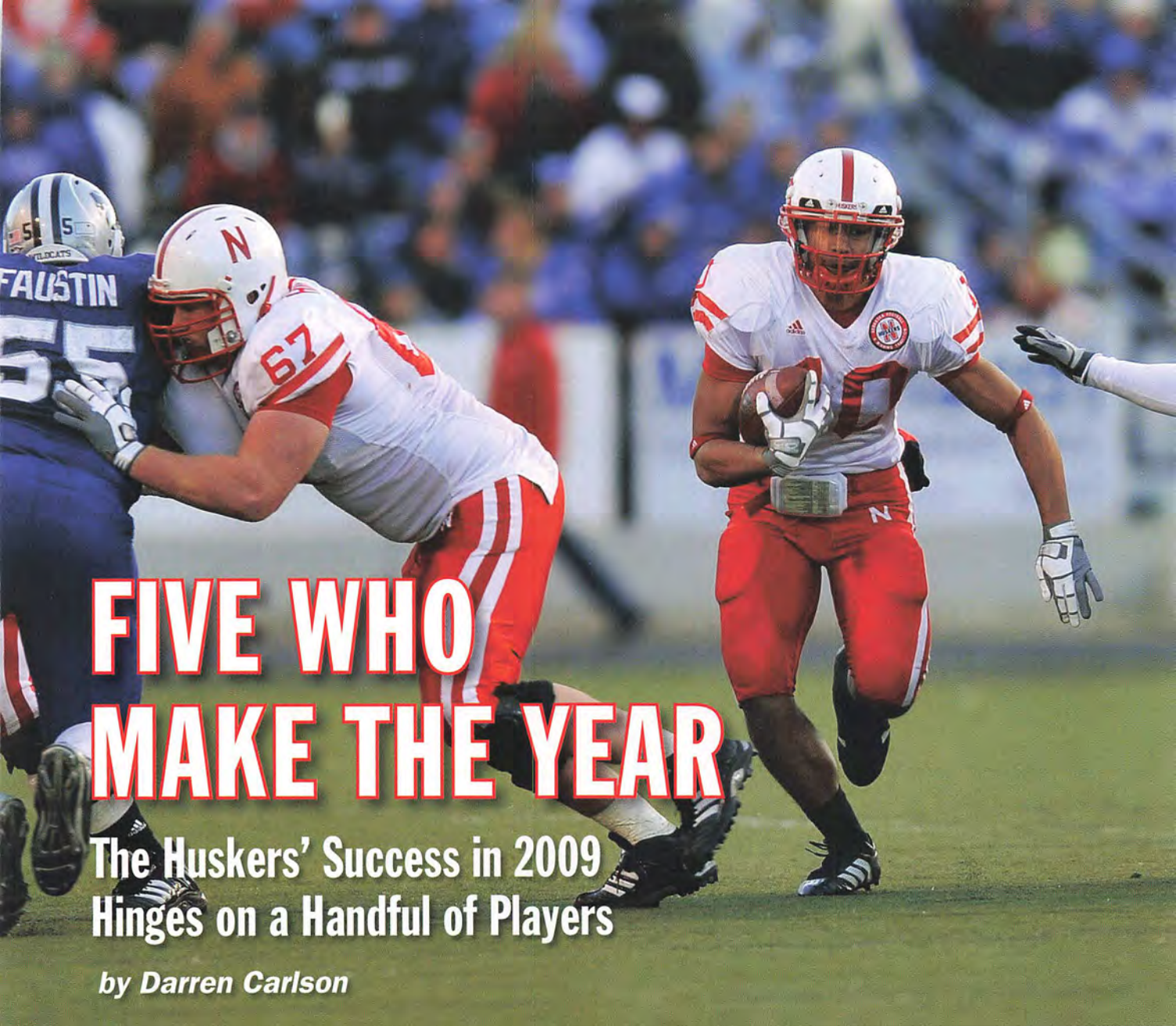
Nebraska fans still have nightmares of that 62–36 debacle the day after Thanksgiving in 2001. Dreams and expectations were shattered that afternoon, and some feel that game signaled the beginning of the decline of Husker football, resulting in the eventual dismissal of Frank Solich and bringing in the dark years under Bill Callahan. Wouldn't it be ironic if Nebraska uses that same 2001 Colorado offense as part of the formula to restore Husker football to national prominence? **MSP**



*Jammal Lord struggled in his first season as a starter as the Huskers went 7-7, one year after playing in the national title game.*

Mike Jaixen is a lifelong Husker fan living in Omaha, who spends his days working as an internet manager and his nights and weekends blogging about the Nebraska Cornhuskers at "Corn Nation" ([www.cornnation.com](http://www.cornnation.com)) and "Husker Mike's Blasphemy" ([huskermike.blogspot.com](http://huskermike.blogspot.com)).





# FIVE WHO MAKE THE YEAR

The Huskers' Success in 2009  
Hinges on a Handful of Players

by *Darren Carlson*

**W**hen evaluating a team to determine whether or not they're capable of contending for a championship, the "five great players" method is a good place to start. The basic premise is simple and works as follows—great teams are generally comprised of great players. You will undoubtedly find at least five great players when reviewing the rosters of teams that win their division, the Big 12 conference, or a national title. These are players who are all-conference first or second team; players who are awards candidates; players who produce points, yards, and tackles; or players who make the plays that win the game.

A football team is greater than just the sum of its parts—when everyone is working towards the same goal, good things happen. In that sense, chemistry and coaching matter a great deal, but if a team doesn't have the horses, they don't win very much. When applying the premise to the 2009 version

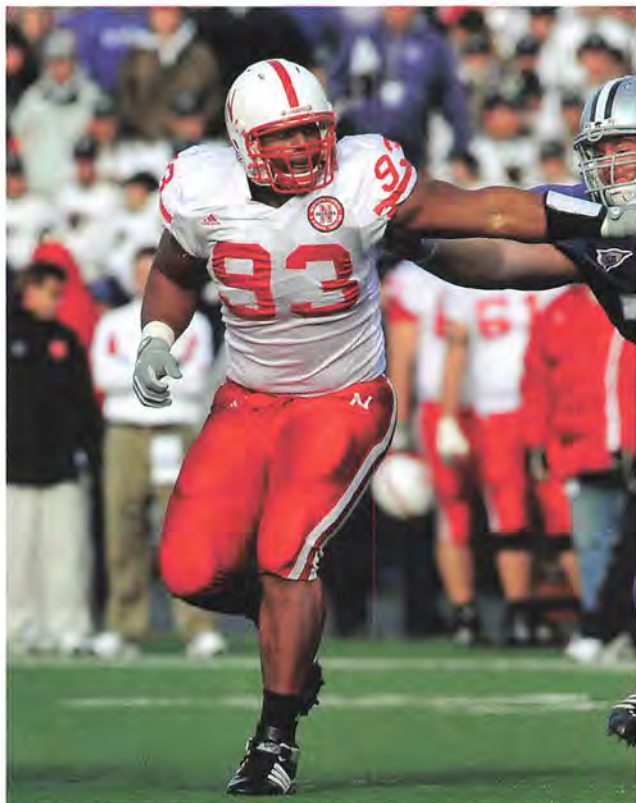
of the Nebraska Cornhuskers, instincts dictated looking for the five guys who can be the difference makers. The first one was obvious. The next few took some thought. The last spot... well, it was a tossup.

## **NDAMUKONG SUH—DEFENSIVE TACKLE**

Any list of potentially great 2009 Huskers begins (and ends?) with Ndamukong Suh. His talent is so great, position so significant, and profile so high that this article could be called "Suh and four other guys." In case you are one of the very few unfamiliar with Suh, take a look at his 2008 exploits.

From his defensive tackle spot, Suh led the Huskers in tackles with 76. That's the most by a lineman since 1992, and the first time a lineman has led the team in stops since 1972. He also collected 19 tackles-for-loss and 7.5 sacks last year. For his efforts, Suh was named first-team All-Big 12





*2008 brought Ndamukong Suh national recognition. 2009 will hopefully bring a Big 12 North title.*

by the Associated Press and second-team All-Big 12 by the league coaches.

The list of last season's accolades doesn't do justice to Suh's dominance. He's a beast. The 6'4", 300-pound Suh is strong enough to absorb double teams and yet quick enough to make plays in the backfield. There were times at which he took over games last year. Heck, the guy scored three touchdowns last season—two on interception returns and another on a reception when he lined up as the fullback in the goal-line formation. Those are the plays that win games.

Suh was a nightmare for Clemson in last season's Gator Bowl. He stymied their run game, pressured the quarterback, and blocked a kick. Small wonder there was speculation that he might bolt early for the NFL. Thankfully for Husker fans, he stuck around for his senior season to help continue in the rebuilding process. As long as he stays healthy, Suh appears primed to be one of the top picks in the next NFL Draft.

Suh also heads the list because of the position he mans for the Blackshirt defense. As the Gator Bowl illustrated, no position on a defense is as important as defensive tackle. A truly great one can throw a wrench into almost any style of offense. Great defensive tackles demand double teams that create opportunities for others and also allow linebackers to move freely and make tackles. Even when he doesn't make the play himself, Suh is clearly the linchpin for the 2009 Husker defense.

## ROY HELU JR.—RUNNING BACK

If Suh is the Huskers' best defensive player, then running back Roy Helu Jr. is their best offensive player. On a team that used a platoon of running backs in 2008, Helu managed to collect 803 rushing yards by going at a 6.4 yards per carry clip. He also hauled in 25 receptions for 266 yards, showing he is a complete back that doesn't need to leave the field on obvious throwing downs.

What's most impressive about Helu's 2008 was the momentum he established in the second half of the season. In the final four regular season games, he averaged 127 yards rushing and 32 yards receiving. Just based on the eyeball test, he was NU's best weapon late in the year with an excellent burst of speed, slashing and athletic running style, and the guts to finish runs. He was one of the few Husker players who showed they belonged on the field with Oklahoma last year.

As he heads in to his junior campaign, the 6'1" Helu has added weight to his frame. He topped out at about 215 pounds this spring. While Helu missed the Red-White Spring Game due to a hamstring injury, coaches said they were impressed with his play while carrying the extra weight. It's fair to say that Helu added the weight to his frame to try and better absorb the pounding from Big 12 defenses and avoid some of the injuries that nagged him in 2008.



*Husker fans are hoping Roy Helu Jr. stays healthy and productive throughout 2009.*

Photo on previous page: Peter G. Allen/Getty Images. Bottom right photo on this page: Peter G. Allen/Getty Images.



That injury history might be genuine cause for concern among Husker fans. Helu has not proven he can stay 100% healthy for very long. He was hampered by a shoulder injury early in 2008. He got nicked up again late in the year versus Colorado, and he couldn't go full speed in the Gator Bowl. Nebraska is fortunate to have talented backs on the depth chart behind Helu, but, when healthy, he gives them the best opportunity to win.

Beyond the production and playmaking Helu provides, he may also give the Huskers something else in 2009: an offensive identity. Many people are concerned about the departure of quarterback Joe Ganz and wide receivers Nate Swift and Todd Peterson, not just because of their production but because they were the team's offensive personality and character. Expect Helu to fill that void. He's well liked by teammates, articulate, gutsy, and open about his devotion to Christianity. He's the kind of player and person that makes teammates better and gets recognized by media members.

### MIKE MCNEILL—TIGHT END

So, if Helu helps fill the chemistry gap created by the departures of Swift and Peterson, who can replace their production? Instead of surfing through a roster of relatively unproven wide receivers, consider the value of tight end Mike McNeill. The 6'4", 240-pound McNeill is the Huskers' third best player, though many might not know it.

McNeill broke the single season record for receptions by a tight end last year, with 32. The junior-to-be also hauled in six touchdown passes. The lack of fanfare that usually accompanies these kinds of numbers likely had to do with the fact that he was just one cog in a very productive offense (NU was 12th nationally in total offense), higher profile teammates (the aforementioned Swift and Peterson), and the fact that the Big 12 was loaded at tight end last year.

With Missouri's Chase Coffman and Oklahoma State's Brandon Pettigrew leaving for the NFL, fans can expect McNeill to be more prominent in the public eye. Oklahoma's Jermaine Gresham might prevent McNeill from being first-team All-Big 12 in 2009, but there will be very few playmakers in the conference that control the middle of the field as well as McNeill will for NU. He is consistent and does not drop catchable balls. He is also athletic enough to make catches on balls contested by defenders and has more than one highlight-worthy play under his belt. Under the tutelage of coach Ron Brown, McNeill has also grown into a more willing and effective blocker.

With McNeill and several other quickly emerging tight ends (Dreu Young, Ben Cotton) on the Nebraska roster, expect to see many more multiple tight end formations from the Huskers as they play to the strengths of their offensive personnel. The ability of McNeill and his counterparts to put



*Mike McNeill's 32 receptions in 2008 set a single season reception record for tight ends.*

pressure on linebackers and safeties down the middle of the field will be essential to the Huskers' success in 2009.

### ALEX HENERY—PLACEKICKER AND PUNTER

Right now, some of you are groaning. A kicker? Really? Yes, really. Special teams are the "hidden third" of football, and often decide the outcome. Games can be won and lost on a single kick, and Alex Henery has proven to be a stone cold stud. He is certainly one who makes the year for the Big Red.

As a placekicker, Henery is very, very accurate. Last year, he made 56-57 extra point attempts, which makes him 101-102 on PATs for his career. He also made 18-21 field goal attempts. That made him the most accurate kicker in the Big 12 in 2008 and earned him second-team All-Big 12 honors from the Associated Press. Don't be shocked if he is a candidate for conference honors as well as national awards in 2009.

Henery, a 6'2", 175-pound junior, is a skinny assassin from long range. It is easy to recall his school-record, 57-yard dagger to beat Colorado last season, but what may be forgotten is that he told head coach Bo Pelini he could make that kick before he actually did it. Henery connected on six other field goals from beyond 40 yards, including a 48-yard kick against Virginia Tech. That kind of range gives Nebraska an important offensive weapon for 2009.

Henery will even try his hand at defense in 2009. Okay, it is not really defense. But, he is also going to punt for NU,



which is really a defensive effort. The double duty might concern some fans, since there is a chance he could wear out, lose some focus, or get injured. But the move makes good sense.

Henery was originally recruited as a punter out of Omaha Burke High School. This is not new to him. In fact, he's punted for the Huskers before. He punted once against USC in 2007, and pinned the Trojans inside the five yard line. Not too bad. Perhaps more importantly, good coaches put their most talented people in position to make the most plays. If Henery has the best leg on the roster, the Huskers might as well put it to the most use.

## ZAC LEE—QUARTERBACK

It is unfair to put Zac Lee on this list, but he's on it anyway. Can you expect the first-year starter to be an award candidate or all-conference performer for the Huskers? No. There are too many other good quarterbacks in the league. Will he to surpass other recent Nebraska quarterbacks like Zach Taylor or Joe Ganz in terms of offensive production? Not really. Those guys set records and were multi-year starters before they got really good. So why is Lee on this list? He's being included because his performance is one that makes or breaks the Huskers in 2009.

Offenses tend to go as the quarterback goes, no player is more important to a team. They manage the team in the huddle and at the line of scrimmage, trigger the action, touch the ball on virtually every offensive play, and are generally the straw that stirs the drink. One of the great football truisms is that teams with a returning starter under center do better, and those with new starters don't do so well. No pressure, Mr. Lee.

Nebraska's lack of reliable depth behind Lee puts added importance on his performance and health. Patrick Witt left the program, which deprived Lee of a competitor this spring. Kody Spano got hurt, which may have hindered the development of a reliable backup. Behind Lee are a converted linebacker (Latravis Washington) and a true freshman (Cody Green). Right now, there is not a solid "Plan B" at quarterback. Lee needs to be the real deal.

Athletically, there are very few who doubt Lee's ability. He looks like the real deal. He's fast enough to give the Huskers a quarterback-run element in their offense. As a former baseball

player, there is good evidence of a very lively arm. He should be strong enough and fast enough. Coaches say he's grown up in the last year and even appears to be emulating the gutsy and coachable Joe Ganz. That's nice to hear, but it all can go out the window on gameday when the pads really start popping.

With so much hinging on Lee's performance, coaches will likely put him in "safe" situations. With a deep offensive line, a stable of running backs, and a reliable tight end, the wise play would be to simplify the offense, run the ball more, and not put Lee in situations where he is apt to fail. Let him make one or two simple reads and then use his athleticism to make plays. Above all else, protect him. If he is to be one of the Huskers' five best players, he'll need help.

## SHAPING THE SQUAD, MAKING NAMES

There are dozens of players who will contribute to Nebraska's success. Selecting five is as difficult as it is arbitrary, but these are the players that shape the Huskers in 2009. The defense is more than just Suh, but it hinges on the plays he creates for others. Offensively, Lee's success is married to Helu's ability to deliver in the run game, with McNeill providing a safety blanket in the passing game. Having a potential game-changer like Henery in both aspects of special teams can mean the difference between 7 wins and 10 wins.

Based on their accomplishments, or just by virtue of their position, these are the five young men who can make the year for the Huskers. Coaches will call on them, and fans will look for them, when a game is on the line. If the Huskers win, the names Suh, Helu, McNeill, Henery, and Lee should fill the

box score. When they lose, these are the young men who will need to improve, answer questions, or prove their leadership by holding teammates accountable. When the 2009 season comes to an end and it is time to count wins and accomplishments, those are the names to watch for on all-conference and awards lists. When players make a team, the team turns around and makes them right back. **MSP**



*Alex Henery enters 2009 as one of the most accurate kickers in the nation.*

Darren K. Carlson is a writer (and confirmed football junkie) living in Omaha with his wife and their daughter. He writes and edits for *Big Red Network*, a website dedicated to covering Husker football.





# AND... FIVE YOU NEED TO WATCH

## Five Players Who Might Make the Difference Between a Good and a Great Season

*by Darren Carlson*

**T**here are all kinds of great and well known players throughout the Big 12. It's pretty easy to peruse the lists of returning starters and presumed top players in the pre-season. Those lists have value, as teams will likely go as many of those players go. But what if things don't go to plan for those top players? Who fills the void? For a team to greatly improve in the win column, other players must step up and make plays. Those players are the ones to watch.

Identifying players who are primed to break out can be a ridiculously inexact science. Emerging players come from all positions and experience levels. They could be older players who have patiently waited for the opportunity, toiling away and quietly improving over the course of a few seasons. Or it might be a young phenom ready to burst on to the scene and turn heads. They might have the chance to fill a void in the roster or get the unique benefit that comes with playing next

to another exceptional talent. Or maybe their talent is too great to keep them off of the field. In any case, here are five of the players that merit scrutiny from Husker fans in 2009.

### **KEITH WILLIAMS: PAVING THE WAY**

Several signs point to Nebraska having an improved running game next year. They have talented backs, a roster with several tight ends and fullbacks to lead the way, and relative inexperience at quarterback. However nothing is more of a bellwether for the running game than the offensive line, and at Nebraska the linemen are nearly as noteworthy as the quarterback. Among this year's crop of big uglies up front, Keith Williams merits the most attention.

Nebraska returns three starters along the offensive line: Williams at left guard, Mike Smith at left tackle, and center Jacob Hickman. Even though he didn't start all of the games



last year, Williams has the talent and experience to stand out.

At 6'5" and 310 pounds, he is the biggest player on the Husker roster. That doesn't mean he's a lumbering lummo. "Once you get to 300 pounds, you don't want to sacrifice speed for size," offensive line coach Barney Cotton told the *Omaha World-Herald*. "But he's shown that he can handle a little bit of extra weight."

Nebraska's left guard situation last year was thrown into disarray when likely starter Andy Christensen had a run-in with the law and was suspended from the team. As a sophomore, Williams's talent was such that senior Mike Huff couldn't hold him off for long. Eventually Williams won the job and started the final nine games of the year. With him in the lineup, the Husker run game improved steadily down the stretch. Heading into 2009, the left side of the NU line is intact. Having chemistry and experience with both his center and the left tackle next to him puts Williams in a position to thrive and pave the way for Husker runners.

Williams knows his time is now, with no one standing between him and massive amounts of playing time. "For me, [it's] just being an all-around player, just trying to improve my skills in general," Williams told the *World-Herald*. "I think I'm a good football player, not great. So I've got a lot of areas to improve."

Williams's will to improve may be the only variable in his becoming a breakout player for Nebraska. He is definitely one to watch.

## JARED CRICK: MEANS, MOTIVE, AND OPPORTUNITY

As much as Keith Williams is in position to breakout along the offensive line, Jared Crick is primed to step up along the defensive line. Few players on the Husker roster are presented with as many means, motive, and opportunity to emerge as Crick.

First, the means: Crick has enough talent to do the job. Originally playing as a tight end in high school, he has the quickness needed to play the three-technique tackle in Coach Pelini's defense. Because of his 6'6" frame, he's been able to pack on quality weight and get up to 290 pounds. He is bigger and stronger than Ty Steinkuhler, the man he hopes to replace in the starting lineup.

Next, he's motivated. Hailing from Cozad in western Nebraska, being a Husker means as much or more to him than anybody on the roster, and it shows in his work ethic. He had better be motivated and hard working, because there is quite a bit of competition for his position. This spring,



*Left guard Keith Williams is one to watch.*

defensive line coach Carl Pelini stated, "Jared Crick has a solid handle on the number one spot, but with Baker Steinkuhler and Terrence Moore we are going to have a rotation there."

Translation: There is going to be a lot of competition. According to nose tackle Ndamukong Suh, Crick is up to the challenge, and is emerging as a leader. "He's really taken control. When we go through skills and drills and coach's runs, he's at the front of the line, pushing and helping other guys who are struggling," Suh told *Nebraska StatePaper.com*, "That's something I respect. Guys are starting to look up to him."

Finally, there is a huge opportunity for Crick. That doesn't just mean the opportunity to start. It's the chance to play next to Suh, who will undoubtedly draw attention and double teams from opponents. For Nebraska to be successful up front, Crick must take advantage of the one-on-one situations sure to come his way. If he can play with the motor and technique that Ty Steinkuhler did, he is in position to be a difference maker for Nebraska.

## WILL COMPTON: THE NEXT BARRETT RUUD?

The middle linebacker position is one of the most important on the team. They make many of the calls and quarterback the defense. By design, they are generally in position to take on lead blockers and make tackles. And in the 4-3, Cover-2 alignment that Coach Pelini and his staff favor, they often have to cover the deep middle of the field on pass plays. For all of these reasons, you seldom see a freshman (redshirt or otherwise) take command of that spot. Barrett Ruud is one very notable exception in Husker history. He started as a freshman and went on to become the school's all-time leader



in tackles. Redshirt freshman Will Compton may be a player comparable to Ruud when it's all said and done. Is this the year he breaks out?

Like Ruud, Compton was very highly regarded as a prospect. He was so desired by linebacker coach Mike Ekeler that Ekeler had a temporary tattoo of Compton's name placed on his arm while he was recruiting him. The 6'2", 235-pound Compton is physically comparable to Ruud. Also like Ruud, Compton never spent a day on the practice squad. While he didn't see game action last year (thus preserving his redshirt), Compton was allowed to practice and prepare with the first-line defenders, rather than toil in relative obscurity. This exposure to the defense and opportunity to learn helped prime Compton for a playing time.

In fact, there was a lot of consideration and hand-wringing whether to play Compton last season as a true freshman. He was listed as the second-team middle linebacker all season. He was reportedly ready and willing to play. As late as October of 2008, Bo Pelini told the *Omaha World-Herald*, "I think he's making really good progress, I'd feel real comfortable putting him into the game."

Of course, Compton will face a massive amount of competition for playing time in 2009. Incumbent starter and senior Phillip Dillard is still on the roster, though injuries slowed Dillard last year and he has gotten into Ekeler's dog house at times. There is also former walk-on Colton Koehler, who started in Dillard's absence last season. While Koehler lacks Compton's raw talent, his physical play and willing attitude make him a favorite among the coaching staff.

With the late season injury to Dillard, burning Compton's redshirt seemed unfair to the player and wasteful to the team, so Koehler got a shot. Still it's difficult for fans not to wonder if Dillard had been injured earlier in the season that it might have been Compton starting in the middle of the Husker defense. With no such constraints and a wide open competition, 2009 might be the year for this young linebacker in the mold of Barrett Ruud to assert himself.

### PRINCE AMUKAMARA: BIG-TIME TALENT

There are a number of reasons to consider cornerback Prince Amukamara a legit candidate for a breakout season with the Huskers. In his limited opportunities in 2008, he made some good plays. He's in a key position for the 2009 Husker defense. Coaches say he's turned the mental corner in terms of knowledge and practice habits.

And, frankly, he's a member of the Husker "all-name" team as both his first and last names are downright cool to say.

As a prospect, Amukamara has the goods. He's 6'1" and 200 pounds—the ideal size for a cornerback (think of former Huskers Zack Bowman or Tyrone Williams). He can really move, too. He was an offensive star in high school, earning Arizona State Player of the Year honors as a senior. Few accolades mean as much as being considered the top player in your state.

What fans saw of Amukamara in 2008 looked pretty darn good. While splitting action at cornerback and playing in a lot of nickel coverage situations, he managed to collect 34 tackles, break up three passes, force two fumbles, and register a sack. Small wonder the coaches say he has a knack for getting to and taking away the ball. That's good for a team seeking more turnovers in 2009.

Cornerback is an essential position for Nebraska given the nature of the pass-happy Big 12. At this point, Amukamara appears to be slightly ahead of a crowd trying to win the starting spot opposite Anthony West. Amukamara will have the opportunity to make plays to help Nebraska succeed.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it appears that Amukamara is just coming in to his own. Secondary coach Marvin Sanders says that practice habits were an issue early in Amukamara's career, but not any more—he's more consistent in his reads and his effort.



*Playing next to Ndamukong Suh, Jared Crick should get plenty of opportunities to disrupt opposing offenses this season.*





*Prince Amukamara's raw talent and work ethic has allowed him to develop into a quality defensive back.*

His situation is reminiscent of another recent Husker with a great name: Nate Swift. Swift, the Player of the Year in Minnesota, brought talent to Nebraska but was inconsistent until emerging in his junior campaign. Amukamara's potential to similarly emerge as a junior makes him one to watch in 2009.

### ANTONIO BELL: PLAYMAKER

The last player on this list might be the least likely to make an impact, but also might be the most exciting. Antonio Bell emerged from obscurity this spring by first qualifying to play for Nebraska and then flashing playmaking ability at a position where the Huskers need it most, wide receiver.

Bell was originally a member of Bo Pelini's first recruiting class in 2008. Admittedly, the new coaching staff took a chance on some players that other schools had cooled on for one reason or another. Bell, with his academic difficulties, was one such long shot. At first, he did not qualify. But, after a season of classroom toil, he managed to become eligible to be a part of Nebraska's 2009 class. Good thing, too, since the Huskers needed a bit of "found money" at the position.

Much of the Husker receiving production left when Swift and Todd Peterson graduated. In their place, most expect Menelik Holt and Niles Paul to step up as the most consistent players on the outside for the Big Red. But if Holt and Paul are the new Swift and Peterson, then who are the new Holt and Paul? In other words, who will be the Huskers

third receiving option? More importantly, neither Holt nor Paul (or really any other receiver on the Husker roster) have the speed and agility to be a great downfield threat. So glaring was the need for speed, that the Huskers converted speedster Marcus Mendoza from a running back to a receiver this spring.

Enter Bell. Physically, he has all the elements the Huskers are looking for in a big-time playmaker. At 6'2" he's bigger than the diminutive Mendoza, but, like Mendoza, Bell has speed to burn. The coaches consider him a natural at the position, with smooth route running and the instincts to go up and get contested passes.

Bell has not disappointed in his only opportunity to date. In the Red-White spring game, he caught an 11-yard pass and made another impressive 27-yard grab that drew huge cheers from the near sellout crowd. He also displayed return skills while fielding kickoffs this spring, an added bonus, and another reason Bell may

break out this season.

Fellow wide receiver Holt recognizes Bell's ability. "He made some big plays that you don't expect to see out of a freshman," Holt told the *Omaha World-Herald*. "We're really proud of his progress." If that progress continues, don't be surprised to see Bell making an impact for the Huskers at some point in the 2009 campaign.

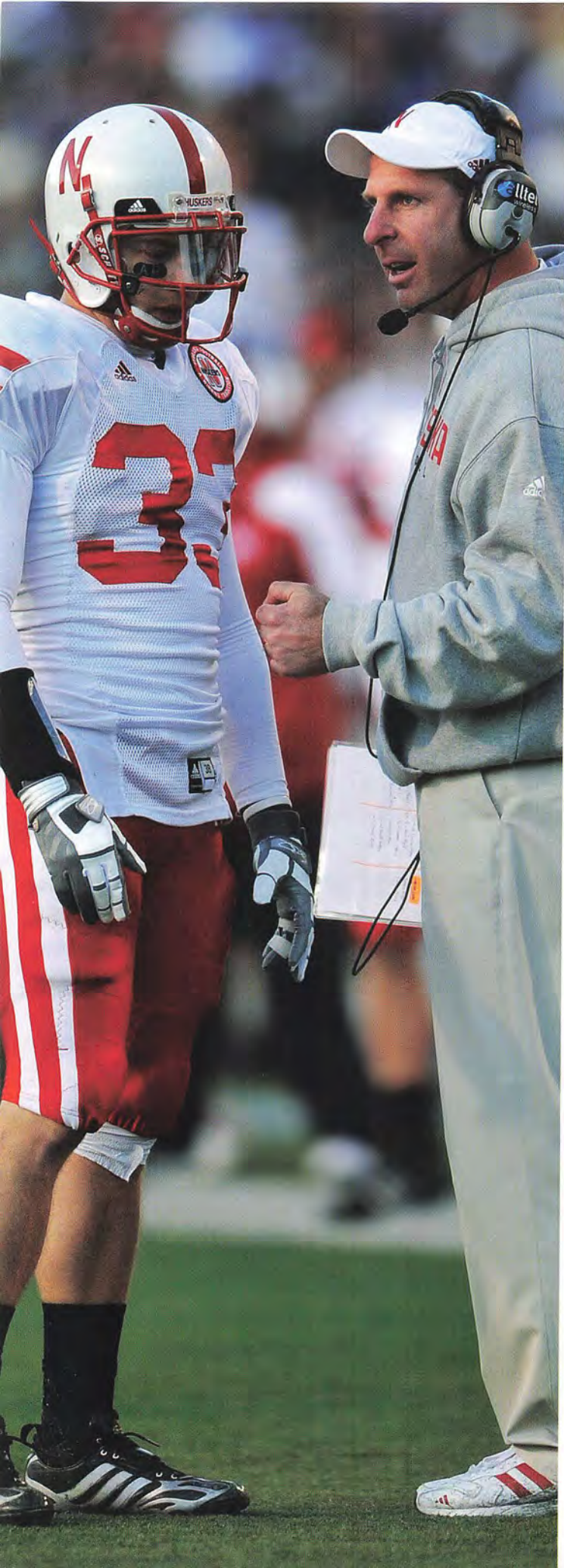
### KEEP A WIDE VIEW

It's not easy to just single out just five players to keep an eye on for a season, given that there are more than 100 players on the roster. Accurately picking just five from such a group is statistically about as realistic as winning big at roulette. Even numbers. Odd numbers. Red. Black(shirt). Who knows? The key while looking for breakout performers is to keep a wide view and develop some reasoning.

Maybe it's a steadily developing player now in a very good situation, like Williams or Crick. Maybe it's a big-time talent ready to make good on the promise that comes with such ability, such as Amukamara. Or maybe it's a young newcomer thrust on the stage because it is their time to make plays, like Compton or Bell. In any case, they merit keeping an eye on. **MSP**

Darren K. Carlson is a writer (and confirmed football junkie) living in Omaha with his wife and their daughter. He writes and edits for *Big Red Network*, a website dedicated to covering Husker football every day.





# GAME OF CYCLES, MAN OF TRADITION

## An Outsider's Look at Bo Pelini's First Year

by Adam Nettina

College football is a game of cycles. Teams rise and fall. Coaches come and go. Players graduate, leave early for the NFL, or fade into obscurity. The cyclical nature of the game extends beyond any individual or team. When looking at the game with the benefit of hindsight, we find a sport constantly in flux in terms of scheme and design. The Single Veer offense, the Desert Swarm defense, and the Power I are all cycles in the move and countermove coaching dynamic born from late night film sessions and blackboard diagrams. Even in the age of the spread offense and zone-read, the next great schematic breakthrough harkens to be implemented on some small school practice field in Anywhere, USA. Change is inevitable.

College football is also a game of tradition. Not just in the oft-quoted "long and storied history" monologue, but in wins and losses and success and failure. It's why people associate winning with the University of Southern California and losing with Duke University. It's why names such as Bryant, Switzer, and Holtz mean something while names like Chaump, Widenhofer, and Helton fall back into the past, only to take up space in dusty record books and long forgotten game programs.

Of all the big city campuses and small town outposts where these competing forces are at work, nowhere do they resonate more than in Lincoln, NE. Known by many as a bastion—perhaps even *the* bastion—of college football in America, the city of a quarter of a million people has every reason to be proud of its Cornhuskers. There is the program's all-time record of 817-337-40 (the 12th best winning percentage of any university), as well as its five national titles. There are Tommy Frazier, Scott Frost, and Turner Gill running the option behind a dominating offensive line, and the steady coaching hands of Bob Devaney



and Tom Osborne roaming the sideline of Memorial Stadium. The dynamic of the place itself is tradition made manifest.

Perhaps it was fitting for the Cornhuskers to fire Bill Callahan and hire Bo Pelini following the 2007 season. Callahan had his chance, rolling the dice of offensive transformation in four up-and-down seasons which eventually culminated in a disastrous 5–7 year. How disastrous? After seeing the second losing season amidst a span of 46 years, Cornhusker fans weren't about to let this high crime of coaching slide, especially considering that *both* losing seasons came under Callahan, and especially considering that the tradition of their fabled Blackshirt defense had been dragged through the mud, allowing 38 points per game. Never mind that the team had (arguably) been in a state of uneven decline since the retirement of Dr. Tom Osborne some ten years earlier—it was two strikes and you're out for Callahan, who gambled with his own cyclical innovations in the one place most fervently apt to resist them.

Enter Pelini, who at 40 years of age had already orchestrated a national title-winning defense at LSU and developed a reputation as a no-nonsense disciplinarian. With a coaching history to include a past stop in Lincoln, the hotshot defensive coordinator was just the man for the job to restore the tarnished legacy of the Blackshirt defense, and just the man to make Nebraska relevant again in an ever changing college football landscape.

Or was he?

Waxing poetics are well and good when viewed through the lens of fandom, but do they hold up in the court of cold, hard facts? Bo Pelini may be a “Nebraska man,” but that shouldn't exclude him from the calculated analysis with which many other first year head coaches are often viewed. Rich Rodriguez is a “Michigan man,” but even a pedigree of blue and gold hasn't stopped critics from questioning his hire following the retirement of Lloyd Carr in Ann Arbor. Then again, Rodriguez went 3–9 in 2008, while Pelini went 9–4. Shouldn't that be enough to satiate the skeptics, who would find that when viewed amongst the context of new head coaches for the 2008 season, Pelini fared remarkably better than his peers?

Of the 18 Football Bowl Subdivision programs with new

head coaches in 2008, Nebraska was one of only seven to produce more wins than the year before. Nebraska's 3.5 game turnaround was the second best for a program with a new head coach in 2008—only Mississippi and Coach Houston Nutt posted a more impressive change in net wins. Pelini was the only first-time head coach of a BCS conference school to post a winning record in 2008. He fared noticeably better than the only other newly-hired Big 12 coach, making Mike Sherman's 4–8 outing in College Station look like a disaster by comparison. Pelini's 2008 team showed marked improvement in a number of areas, noticeably on defense. The Huskers, who finished 112th in the nation in total defense in 2007, rebounded to finish 55th in total defense under Pelini's guidance, surrendering an average of nearly 127 yards less per game in 2008. In fact, the Cornhusker defense posted dramatic improvements across the board in Pelini's first season, increasing total sack output from 13 in 2007 to 35 in 2008, improving tackles for a loss by nearly one per game, and holding opponents to 115.7 yards less per game on the ground.

To say Pelini was the right hire for the Cornhuskers just because he had more success than the majority of new head coaches in 2008 or because he elicited an apparent statistical turnaround on defense is to look past the lessons of history. Not every successful college football head coach started their career with a bang, and the past provides plenty of examples of just the opposite. Bill Snyder was 1–10 in 1989 at Kansas State before building the program into a national contender,



*Mississippi's Houston Nutt was the only new head coach to fare better in net wins than Bo Pelini in 2008.*



while Frank Beamer won a combined five games at Virginia Tech over his first two seasons. George Welsh was 2–9 during his first year at Virginia, Kirk Ferentz went 1–10 at Iowa, and Pete Carroll finished 6–6 during his first run at Southern California. Even the legendary Joe Paterno—the very incarnation of winning college football—was a ho-hum 5–5 during his inaugural outing at Penn State, has since gone on to have four undefeated seasons and win two national titles.

The circumstances under which Pelini took a 5–7 team to a 9–4 team were not the same as the situations in which many of these past and present coaching greats found themselves when they took over their respective programs. Nebraska had a losing season in Callahan's final year, but the Cornhuskers were nowhere near as bad as the 0–11 team Snyder inherited, or even the 5–7 USC team Paul Hackett left Pete Carroll. The Cornhuskers had won the Big 12 North in 2006 en route to a 9–5 finish, and had been ranked five weeks into the 2007 season before a blowout loss to Missouri sent things spiraling out of control. Callahan had put together top-25 recruiting classes in 2004, 2005, and 2006, according to *Phil Steele's College Football Preview 2008*, and even in defeat still boasted the nation's ninth best total offense during the 2007 season. Added to that, Nebraska came within a blown halftime lead at Colorado of making a bowl game. So, the situation could aptly be described as highly conducive to the success of *any* coach stepping into Lincoln in the winter of 2008.

To say that Bo Pelini had several key advantages in 2008 over that of his predecessor in 2007 is to understate the issue. The 2008 Cornhuskers had the benefit of playing a relatively mild schedule, facing opponents with a combined 73–65 record. Callahan's final team played opponents with a combined 82–54 record. Pelini had the benefit of playing three non-BCS teams in 2008, with only one (Western Michigan) going to a bowl game. Callahan squared off against two non-BCS teams in 2007, both of which went bowling (Nevada and Ball State.)

If the Cornhusker defense was beyond awful in 2007 it was not completely without apology. While Nebraska was not completely decimated by graduation following a reasonably successful 9–5 year in 2006, the Cornhuskers had the misfortune of having to replace six starters on defense, including four senior starters on the defensive line. Defensive line coach John Blake had to be replaced, as did the team's leading tackler in linebacker Stewart Bradley. It's no surprise then that Kevin Cosgrove's defense gave up a maddening 5.2 yards per rush and 232 yards per game on the ground in 2007, the highest totals for a Nebraska defense in modern history. Pelini's run defense may have been markedly better in 2008, but it almost had to be, if for no other reason than it couldn't possibly regress from the year before.



*2007 defensive coordinator Kevin Cosgrove—could firing him have saved Callahan's job?*

Then there is the question of offense. As head coach, Callahan assumed full responsibility for his staff, but his pedigree was that of an offensive mind, not as a defensive coordinator. Viewed objectively, he succeeded over the course of his Cornhusker tenure in not only transitioning the offense away from the option, but in improving its overall production in terms of points per game. Frank Solich's 2003 team may have gone 10–3, but it only averaged 24.8 points per game, nowhere near the 33.4 that Callahan's 5–7 team of 2007 averaged. The distinct weakness of Callahan's teams in Lincoln was that they failed miserably in producing a positive turnover margin. Given the two-sided nature of the turnover battle, Callahan cannot bare full fault in this matter, as it was Kevin Cosgrove's defense which managed just 11 turnovers gained in 2007. Defensively the Cornhuskers had not been spectacular, but until the 2007 season they weren't God-awful.

While it's said that well-coached teams produce turnovers, can Callahan really be blamed for the egregious 17-turnover deficit his team ran in 2007? It wasn't Callahan



who threw the four interceptions that Joe Ganz tossed against Kansas, nor Callahan who threw three picks against Colorado. Given these facts, coupled with a year of “bad luck” in gaining turnovers on defense, Callahan looks more the recipient of an unfortunate series of events rather than the creator of them. It wasn’t as if Pelini’s defense in 2008 showed a dramatic turnaround in producing turnovers, as they finished the year with only 17.

Keeping in mind that since 1996 teams that recorded double-digit turnover deficits improved their records the next season in 68% of cases, according to *Phil Steele’s College Football Preview 2008*, Pelini’s “improvement” to a -11 turnover ratio in 2008 needs to be viewed as expected. Given that, shouldn’t Callahan’s 2007 season be viewed as a “rebuilding year” that was necessary to set up the team’s success in 2008?

It is an interesting notion, especially considering that Pelini’s 2008 defense was far from the iron curtain most Nebraska fans remembered from his 2003 stint as defensive coordinator. If we take a look at the statistics, we come to find that Pelini’s 2008 defense was much more akin to the defense which led to Bill Callahan’s downfall in 2007. Pelini’s rebuilt Blackshirt defense of 2008 surrendered the second most points in Cornhusker history (371), 36 more than the

next closest mark set in 2002. While Pelini may have shored up the Cornhusker defense in allowing some 127 fewer yards per game in 2008 than in 2007, Nebraska *regressed* in terms of pass efficiency defense, dropping from a rating of 130.2 in Callahan’s final year to 133.9 in Pelini’s first. Pelini’s defense gave up 62 points to Oklahoma in 2008, 52 to Missouri, and perhaps most embarrassing, 35 points at home to a Virginia Tech offense which averaged only 22 points a game in 2008. When it came to playing top competition, the Cornhuskers were overmatched, allowing a staggering 73.4% completion percentage in four losses to teams which finished the year in the AP Top 20. Ironically, it was Nebraska’s offense, led by Callahan holdover Shawn Watson, which kept the Cornhuskers in several close games, improving point per game output by nearly two points from 2007.

To the skeptical observer, these statistics draw a contrarian picture of Pelini’s first year at Nebraska, painting an image of a coach who benefited more from a culmination of circumstance than that of his own coaching ability. Ultimately no one can dispute the improvements made in terms of wins and losses from Callahan’s final year to Pelini’s first, but outside of Lincoln the firing of Callahan may have seemed excessive. After all, the idea of college football dynasties had been shaken to its core with recent and similar regressions in Coral Gables and South Bend, leading some to question whether or not it was realistic to hold *any* program to the standards of 42 straight non-losing seasons. Why should Callahan have had to pay when the real problems of 2007 revolved around Kevin Cosgrove’s defense and the inability to come up with turnovers? Couldn’t Callahan be called the unfortunate beneficiary of bad luck, injuries, and a poor defensive coordinator? Shouldn’t head coaches in today’s college football landscape be granted the occasional rebuilding year?

These questions notwithstanding, the decision to dismiss Pelini’s success in 2008 to factors such as a mild non-conference schedule or Bill Callahan’s past recruiting success is to overlook the course of the 2008 Cornhusker season and the realities of the Big 12 conference. For starters, the Big 12 of 2008 was a decidedly different conference than the one Pelini coached in during his one year stint as defensive coordinator in Lincoln in 2003. The offensive explosion that took place over the last five years of college football is no myth, as Big 12 offenses averaged some 35 more yards per game in 2008 than they did in 2003, including an increase of 53.4 yards



*Proclaiming himself a “Michigan man,” Rich Rodriguez proceeded to go 3–9 in his first season as the Wolverines headman.*





*Mike Sherman was the only other new head coach in the Big 12. His 4–8 record and 40-point loss to Texas didn't sit too well with the Aggie faithful.*

per game through the air. Statistically then, it makes sense that Pelini's defense of 2008 wasn't up to par with the one Cornhusker fans remembered in 2003, especially considering the Cornhuskers played an altogether weaker schedule during the 2003 season. No statistic is more telling when evaluating Nebraska's 2008 defensive improvement than that of points allowed per game. Cosgrove's defense allowed a stunning 37.9 points per game in 2007, while Pelini's defense allowed 28.5 points per contest. If that wasn't enough, Pelini's defense posted the improvement despite a two point overall *increase* in Big 12 scoring per game from 2007 to 2008.

In terms of coaching intangibles, perhaps the best illustration of Pelini's turnaround comes in the form of halftime adjustments. In four seasons, Callahan never led his team back from a halftime deficit. Pelini did it twice in just one season. Likewise, Pelini's 2008 team never surrendered a halftime lead, finishing the year 6–0 when ahead at the half. Pelini's team showed a clear resilience in the second half of games, just as they did in the second half of the year. Callahan's team dropped six of the final seven games in

2007, while Pelini's team rallied to win six of the last seven. Perhaps more importantly to the psyche of Nebraska fans, the 2008 Cornhuskers didn't yield an average of 70.5 points in losses to Kansas and Colorado. Instead, Pelini's 2008 defense held each of Nebraska's final three opponents to under 300 yards, including limiting Clemson to 210 yards in the Gator Bowl victory.

Therefore it's not unreasonable to conclude that while Pelini was stepping into a very good situation in Lincoln, he was not stepping into one in which the presence of *any* coach would have sufficed. Pelini's defensive pedigree was unmatched when returning to Lincoln, and should improve during his tenure at Nebraska. The most telling example of this comes from the regression of LSU's defense following Pelini's departure. The Tigers gave up 36.75 more yards and 4.2 more points per game in 2008 without Pelini at the helm, even with the benefit of a 43-yard and 4.7-point *drop* in average SEC offensive production from 2007 to 2008.

College football is a game of tradition. To the Nebraska fan, there is something natural about the fiery Pelini roaming the sidelines of Memorial Stadium, urging on a stout defense during a crisp November afternoon. That Pelini could post such a dramatic turnaround in one season opens up a realm of possibilities, heightening expectations for a fan base already plotting a return to prominence. Yet even in its iconic brilliance, such a scene means little in terms of yards per game, recruiting classes, and offensive inheritance, which reveal a more complex story.

College football is a game of cycles. The Nebraska program of 2008 was at a different state than the one which Pelini left in 2003, just as the Big 12 of 2008 was in a different state than the one Pelini left after he took the defensive coordinator position at LSU in 2005. The game is more open, the offenses more explosive. If statistics grant for us a confusing and incomplete story of Nebraska's 2008 improvement, then we should revert to more traditional indicators of success. That a 9–4 Nebraska team was more successful than a 5–7 team is apparent, as is the notion that the 2008 Cornhuskers walked a little taller than their 2007 selves.

Time will tell whether or not Bo Pelini was the right hire for Nebraska. Yet in a college football world so obsessed with the comings and going of coaches, schemes, and players, perhaps there is some truth in the idea that a man of tradition can right the ship for a program weathering the sea in a game of cycles and change. **MSP**

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# Recruiting & Player





*Rex Burkhead*

# MEET THE FRESHMEN

## The 2009 Recruiting Class

*by Brandon Cavanaugh*

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**T**he 2009 recruiting class represents Head Coach Bo Pelini's first at Nebraska. Last year, 28 commitments were brought in as Pelini and his new coaching staff scrambled hard to keep Bill Callahan's final recruiting class together. The work was so intense and time-dependent that the staff enlisted the help of Athletic Director Tom Osborne who was required to take and pass the NCAA recruiting test before he could assist in recruiting.

Pelini had the advantage of having a full year to recruit in 2008 and into 2009, as well as the aid of some very energetic assistants. As a result, this year's class is a mixture of local flavor and Texas talent, heavy on speed, and gives a tip of the hat to size. Most of all, it boasts a vast majority of players who aren't going to give up on a play until the whistle has sounded. If that doesn't sound like the type of player Bo Pelini wants in his or offensive coordinator Shawn Watson's system, then I don't know what does.

Watching the recruiting tapes and highlights of these newest Husker prospects revealed that the message Nebraska wants to send is that Bo Pelini's version of the Cornhuskers are coming to do damage.

### QUARTERBACK

The lone quarterback commitment in 2009 is a rare talent from Dayton, TX, 6'4", 220-pound **Cody Green**. Green rushed for 1,543 yards and 27 touchdowns while passing for 3,226 yards and 36 touchdowns, and throwing only five interceptions as a senior in high school. The most impressive part of that passing statistic is that Cody had a 65% completion rate. Perhaps what should have Cornhusker fans drooling the most over Green's potential is his true dual-threat capability.

# Development



He is exceedingly quick making his reads before taking off in what seems like all-too-easy fashion. Green enrolled early, starting in January, and has been reportedly stinging the hands of receivers since arriving in Lincoln. Green's commitment was one of the crown jewels of this class. He doesn't come in as a raw project at quarterback, but rather an athlete with fantastic skills that will be well served with time to digest the playbook and Shawn Watson's system. Green's mix of burst, energy, and power are a rare combination in young quarterbacks.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Green is his demeanor. When speaking with or listening to him, it is more like having a conversation with a grown man than a kid straight out of high school. As long as Green can avoid the injury bug, he will have a big future for the Cornhuskers. Green is likely to redshirt the 2009 season. He received offers from Oklahoma State, Stanford, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Baylor, Boston College, Houston, and Mississippi State.

## RUNNING BACKS

**Rex Burkhead, Dontrayevous Robinson, and C.J.**

**Zimmerer** offer their services behind the quarterback from the crop of 2009 Cornhuskers.



*C.J. Zimmerer comes from Omaha Gross as a fullback/H-back.*

A second stud out of Texas, Plano's Rex Burkhead has graced more magazine covers than many a supermodel. The 5'11", 190-pounder nicknamed "Superman" ran for 1,762 yards on 255 attempts (6.9 yard-per-rush average) and 28 touchdowns last year. He also caught 42 passes for 594 yards and five touchdowns, which should satisfy Watson's desire to continue a system featuring a very versatile running back.

An AP first-team all-state selection in 2008, Burkhead runs with a very powerful style. He thrashes through defenders and scrapes his way towards every last yard. His hands are about what you would expect coming from a player initially labeled an "athlete," or multi-purpose player, early in the recruiting process. However, Burkhead possesses enough raw talent that it would not be surprising to see him get on the field in 2009. Burkhead received offers from Stanford, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Virginia, Auburn, California, Louisville, Michigan, and Ole Miss among others.

Continuing in the line of "big backs" comes Eules, Texas's Dontrayevous Robinson, a 6'1", 215-pound dump truck who looks to fill in the mold of Quentin Castille. The difference between the two is that Robinson may be quicker. That quickness allows him to hit a hole fast, potentially turning a small gain into a large one. Robinson's hands appear immediately more reliable. He traps the ball incredibly well and can switch from receiver to running back in quick fashion. He ran for 614 yards on 114 carries (5.5 yards per carry) and 11 touchdowns in his senior season. Robinson also received offers from Southern Mississippi, New Mexico, Utah, and Tulsa.

Finally, we come to 6'0", 213-pound fullback/H-back C.J. Zimmerer. Out of Omaha, Zimmerer brings passion to the position, but his speed may be a bit lacking. That is natural coming out of high school, and looking to compete in the Big 12 especially with so many people on the depth chart, Zimmerer is going to need a year or two to develop. The good news is that he has mentors to look up to and learn from.

Zimmerer will do well initially in pass protection drills after acclimating to the speed of the college game. He clearly has that part of his skill set down. C.J. shows the necessary determination and is not afraid to put his body on the line to make a play. Once Zimmerer does gain the speed of the college game, he will be able to make a bit more of an impact as a part of the play rather than just blocking for it. It is clear that he has a lot of room to grow in ability. His size is nearly ideal, and after he completes coach Dobson's strength and conditioning regimen, he could help to add a dynamic new threat in offensive coordinator Shawn Watson's ever-growing weapons cache. Zimmerer rushed for 1,325 yards on 127 attempts (10.4 yards per carry) and 17 touchdowns as a senior.



## WIDE RECEIVERS

Junior College transfer **Brandon Kinnie** is the lone difference-making wide receiver in the Huskers' 2009 class. The 6'3", 215-pound Kinnie, out of Fort Scott Community College, brings always acclaimed height to the receiving corps, but he seems to have a bit of hesitation. Specifically, he will make a catch, stare a defender in the eye, and then take off. This worked well at the junior college level but the step from there to an FBS school is a big one, especially when leaping into one of the "big boy" conferences like the Big 12.

Kinnie shows the ability to look a ball in and make a secured grab, and has the potential to be put in some exciting packages. Like most junior college recruits, expect Kinnie to attempt to make an immediate impact in the starting lineup. Kinnie received offers from Kansas and Arkansas.

## TIGHT END

Ever since the heyday of Matt Herian, pre-injury, Nebraska fans have been pining for a tight end with that rare mix of blocking strength and wide receiver speed. In 2009, the Cornhuskers find themselves with a wealth of talent at the position and it gets stronger with lone tight end commitment **J.T. Kerr**. The 6'4", 230-pound San Diego native is a load,



*Look for JUCO transfer Brandon Kinnie to fight for playing time at receiver in 2009.*



*Offensive lineman Nick Ash will likely redshirt in 2009.*

and when given the old eyeball test almost passes for a larger running back rather than a tight end. Kerr is not shy about contact. He is good for a quick pancake block on an undersized man, but more importantly he keeps his quarterback's jersey clean.

J.T. is a very special tight end as he possesses the ability to catch well, block effectively, and does very well in space. He could use a bit more quickness, but luckily Nebraska is so stacked at the position both he and his team can afford the luxury of time. Kerr received offers from Arizona and San Diego State.

## OFFENSIVE LINE

Nick Ash, Jess Coffey, Brent Qvale, and Jeremiah Sirles step up in an attempt to restore memories of "The Pipeline," the Nebraska offensive lines that plowed their way to national titles in the '90s.





*Offensive lineman Brent Qvale should redshirt in 2009 to gain strength and technique.*

A staple of Nebraska football for years, and perhaps one of the favorite recruiting categories every year, the offensive line boasts four commitments for the 2009 class. First up is 6'5", 261-pound Nick Ash out of Keller, TX. Take a moment to bring out the syrup because Ash serves up plenty of pancakes.

Putting his man on the ground seems to be a specialty of Ash's, but it could also be a hindrance if he decides to go to that well too often. There are many times when an offensive lineman will go to "squash" his man only to be put face-first into the turf himself. That said, Nick is a big, beefy guy that will most likely see time at either of Nebraska's guard positions. He's consistently looking to make a play and does so with a passion. Ash is a solid recruit, and received offers from Purdue, Texas Tech, Vanderbilt, Washington State, TCU, Arizona, Houston, and Kansas.

Continuing the Texas influx is Jess Coffey, a 6'7", 290-pound beast from Denton. Coffey has an offensive lineman's build, there is no doubt about that. One area of concern is pad level—how high his shoulder pads are relative to a defensive lineman. An offensive lineman must stay below his defender in order to maintain his balance and Coffey has a tendency to keep his position a little too high, which will leave him susceptible to being beaten by Big 12 rush ends. Another area of concern is what appears to be a lack of explosiveness off of the snap. It may be that Coffey was able to do his damage in high school by being just what he is: a big guy.

It's not all bad news. Two things Coffey does have are raw strength and vision. When he latches onto his man, he's a bulldozer and seems to pick up a rush quickly. If he can

learn to get lower off of the snap and get the initial burst that strength and conditioning coach Dobson can help him develop, Coffey could be dangerous. Coffey also received offers from Utah, Washington State, Kansas, and Harvard.

Taking a break from Texas boys, we look north to Williston, ND for Brent Qvale. At 6'7" and 335 pounds, Qvale has the frame and size to work at the tackle spot right out of high school. Qvale has the explosiveness that Coffey lacks, but it doesn't come out on every play. This is something that can be corrected by coaching. Qvale is a behemoth, though, and you don't want to get in his way moving downhill. Qvale also received offers from Wisconsin, Montana, North Dakota, North Dakota State, Montana State, and Iowa.

Finally, we examine Jeremiah Sirles, a 6'6", 280-pound Lakewood, CO native. Watching Sirles, you can see a frame that still has some room to grow, but his lack of drive is noticeable. Sirles comes out of his stance well and nails a first push, but after that he appears lackluster. An offensive lineman must stay engaged with his defender, and Sirles will easily get beaten with his current set of skills. Again, this is a shortcoming that can be overcome by coaching. Sirles received offers from Northwestern, Oregon, Texas Tech, New Mexico State, Arizona State, California, Colorado State, Kansas State, and Louisville.

Overall, Nebraska's group of offensive linemen look like projects and will all likely redshirt, which is fine given the current depth of the position. They have the size, but further development will give them time to tack on a little more firepower.



## DEFENSIVE LINE

A trio of defensive linemen comes into the fold with **Jason Ankrah**, **Cole Pensick**, and **Thaddeus Randle**.

At 6'4" and 248 pounds, Jason Ankrah is a treat to watch at the defensive end position. When first sitting down to watch the young man from Gaithersburg, MD, it was difficult to stifle a chuckle at how Ankrah plays like a man with his hair on fire—like watching some manner of quarterback-seeking missile. You can try to run from Ankrah, but he will catch you. You can try to run at Ankrah, but he will make you feel it the next day. You can try to block Ankrah, but even that isn't a given as he has uncanny motor skills allowing him almost free reign over an opponent's backfield.

Watching an offensive lineman take Jason on is worth watching. While he may have Ankrah within his grasp for a moment, it is as if Jason is slicked down with oil as he easily slips the block to make a tackle on a running play. He has excellent vision, as shown by how he gets his hands up when a quarterback attempts to make a pass while under pressure in his general vicinity, and overall his football mentality easily ranks as excellent.



*Jason Ankrah has an exciting future as a Husker defensive end.*



*Lincoln Northeast's Cole Pensick comes in as a defensive lineman with room to grow.*

The purpose of this praise is not to dub him the next big thing at defensive end for Nebraska, but this much is true: All current ends are going to need to work hard to keep Ankrah from nipping at their heels. Jason had 42 unassisted tackles in 2008, along with 12 assisted tackles, 14 tackles-for-loss, eight sacks, and two pass breakups. Ankrah also received offers from Virginia Tech, Clemson, Michigan, and Maryland.

Lincoln's own Cole Pensick measures 6'2" and 260 pounds. That's all well and good, but Pensick actually spent a good chunk of time on Lincoln Northeast's offensive line this past fall. That's not to say he can't play some quality defense, though. Pensick is very quick and deceptively elusive for his size. Cole plays the game well and with aggression, but the whistle-to-whistle movement that it takes to make a certified Big 12 defensive lineman was not apparent. Pensick was a pleasant surprise and there's no doubt his time spent on the offensive side of the ball will serve him well as he scoots over to the opposite end. Pensick racked up 16 unassisted tackles and 22 assisted tackles in 2008, along with three for a loss.

Heading back down to Texas, we examine Thaddeus Randle, a 6'1", 255-pound defensive tackle and an AP first-team all-state selection as a senior. He may seem a bit undersized for a defensive end, but don't tell "Thad" that, as he looks as comfortable as a fish in water on the line. He has a quick first step and solid motor skills to punch his way into a backfield. The bull rush appears to be his weapon of choice,



but that will be a habit that the Pelini brothers break him of early since that move can be swallowed up whole by even a decent lineman.

When double-teamed, Randle does not stop, he has the motor that Nebraska fans love when it comes to their defensive linemen. His vision is excellent and, in watching him, it is almost as if he sniffs out the football, delivering powerful blows to those who might stand in his way. A few fullbacks may have regretted their assignment after meeting Thad. A favorite aspect about Randle is his form tackling. There has been a noticeable drop in fundamental tackling amongst high school prospects in recent years, but Thad looks like he could write a textbook on the matter. Randle also received offers from Oregon and Texas A&M.

## LINEBACKERS

Two dangerous linebackers are ready to make their presence known for Nebraska in **Eric Martin** and **Chris Williams**.

Linebacker is a position that Nebraska recruited very well in 2008, and, though only two commits are in the 2009 class, both are keepers. Moreno Valley, California's Eric Martin stands lean and mean at 6'2" and 216 pounds. Martin does not play around and delivers shot after shot when free on an assignment. In watching Martin play, it's easy to see him putting on a few more pounds of muscle and shaving some time off of his shuttle runs before playing a pass-rushing, "Will" linebacker in the form of Demorrio Williams. Pelini enjoys having a linebacker like that in his arsenal and Martin certainly fits the bill.

He flows well sideline to sideline, but sometimes can be caught just a half step off. Another area of concern is occasional arm tackling. Martin's vision is solid, but has room to be honed further. It's never a question of heart or desire with Martin, and once a few nuances of his game are fine-tuned, he will be a demon. Martin also received offers from Washington, Washington State, Nevada, Boise State, Arizona, and Arizona State.

Chris Williams is a very special type of linebacker. The 6'0", 230-pound prospect from Abilene, TX has the ability to read and react nearly simultaneously. He moves as smoothly as a computer-generated player in a video game. Williams has a truly rare ability to judge distance and gauge it against what he knows he is capable of before deciding whether to drop back into coverage or jump on the runner. This ability allows Williams to have confidence covering his man in a passing situation or running in to make a tackle.

Williams seems to have a constant knowledge of where the football is on the field even when his back is to a ball carrier. His vision is astounding, so good that he can literally



*Chris Williams is a typical Bo Pelini linebacker: physical and punishing.*

determine the type of tackle he can make—he seems to know immediately if he can take his man head-on, if his best bet is a shoe-string tackle, or if he can go for the punch and knock the ball free.

The hits that Williams delivers are downright brutal, it's a physics lesson in motion watching him destroy an offensive opponent. Williams also has the ability to lock up on a man and punch the ball free. He's so impressively quick on the high school level, Cornhusker fans should be anxious to see what he could do in college.

Unfortunately, we will not see that immediately since there are some fantastic prospects in front of him on the depth chart. In 2008, Williams had 62 unassisted tackles, 28 assisted tackles, 17 tackles-for-loss, two sacks, two interceptions, one pass breakup, and two fumble recoveries. Williams received offers from Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, LSU, and Missouri.

## DEFENSIVE BACKS

A quartet of defensive backs will be calling Lincoln home as **Dejon Gomes**, **Andrew Green**, **Lazarri Middleton**, and **Dijon Washington** all look to have a very physical impact in the Cornhusker secondary.



6'0", 190-pound Dejon Gomes is a JUCO transfer from the City College of San Francisco and was one of three recruits to enroll early at Nebraska. Gomes's route-jumping abilities are fantastic and it appears that it is only a matter of learning Bo Pelini's playbook before he gets on the field as a starter.

He reads a quarterback's eyes to a fantastic degree and has such speed that if he's not starting at cornerback then he needs to be returning kicks or punts. His vision up the field and ability to adjust to his surroundings is nothing short of special, and to see what he can develop into is very exciting.

Some may look at Gomes's measurables and balk. It's really a simple concept that there are two types of cornerbacks regardless of size: those who can flat out play and those who cannot. Gomes is in the first category. He doesn't take plays off, he's incredibly quick and fluid, and a pleasure to watch play in the defensive backfield. In 2008, Dejon notched 26 unassisted tackles, five tackles-for-loss, four interceptions, and 14 pass breakups. Gomes also received offers from UNLV, Utah, Eastern Michigan, Hawaii, Houston, and Kansas State. He has three years to play, two at Nebraska.

San Antonio, TX product Andrew Green adds to the Cornhuskers' apparent Lone Star State raid. At 6'0" and 181 pounds, Green is the type of guy that Pelini might have had his eye on while back at LSU, not just for the Scarlet and Cream of Nebraska. He has a very good sense of where he is on the field and, regardless of where an interception is made,

he can turn into a running back very quickly or tiptoe against the sidelines with ease.

A common thread with Pelini's recruits is "hit or go home" and Green continues that tradition in excellent form. His tackling is precise and his ability to get that first push off of a receiver is already there, so shying away from contact should not be a worry when it comes to Green's mentality.

Speaking of hitting, Green's run support is nothing short of impressive. While very good at what he does as a cornerback, he can help out very quickly once a run breaks free. It's recruits like Green that can make Cornhusker fans excited to see what a full-fledged, Pelini-recruited defense can do. Andrew had 56 tackles as a senior in 2008, along with 10 pass breakups, and one fumble recovery after switching over to defense full-time having played as a running back as well the year before. Green also received offers from Oklahoma State, Purdue, Baylor, Colorado, Houston, Iowa State, Kansas, and Missouri.

To show you how much the staff wanted Long Beach, CA's Lazarri Middleton, both defensive coordinator Carl Pelini and secondary coach Marvin Sanders were assigned to recruit him. The 6'1", 190-pound Middleton shows why he warranted such attention as he easily bullies wide receivers off of their routes or out of the end zone.

Middleton strikes you as the kind of player you want coming off the edge on a cornerback blitz because, first, you know he's going to arrive at his intended destination,



*Rex Burkhead may see the field in 2009 due to his versatility and playmaking abilities.*





*Taylor Martinez was recruited as an "athlete," but may end up at quarterback.*

and, second, you know that the quarterback is going to feel it once he's arrived. He has every capability to get a sack or force a fumble.

One thing that does give some concern regarding Middleton, however, is that he appears to play the route and not the man. Now this is fine in zone coverage, but not enough tape was available to make a true determination, like there was with Andrew Green.

This isn't to say Middleton can't cover well one on one, but rather there was not enough evidence to officially feel comfortable with the idea. It is easy to attest to Middleton's ability to hit and play well in run support. This appears to be another trait in the Pelini recruiting scheme for cornerbacks. Middleton received offers from Kansas State, SMU, and Idaho State.

Dijon Washington's commitment in October of 2008 was celebrated by many Cornhusker fans and rightfully so. The 6'0", 173-pound safety prospect can mix it up with the best of them while possessing excellent ballhawking skills. Washington's tackling is textbook for the most part, which helps him deliver a trademark hit—much like several other members of this class, he is not afraid to bring the wood.

Washington is the type of player that makes a safety blitz less of an "all or nothing" approach and could easily be defined as a player that would cause a quarterback to think twice about throwing over the middle near his man. Finally, Washington continues to play whistle-to-whistle, an encouraging trait that several of Pelini's signings have in common. Washington received offers from Oregon State, San Diego State, Washington, and Washington State.

## ATHLETE

While Corona, CA's Taylor Martinez is technically listed as an athlete, quarterback was his primary position as a high school senior and is likely where he will see time initially as a Cornhusker. The 6'0", 176-pound Martinez rushed for 750 yards and 12 touchdowns for Centennial High School while passing for 3,019 yards and 28 touchdowns, and featuring a 61% completion rate.

Martinez possesses the ability to be a dual-threat quarterback, but he has an uphill battle when facing the likes of Zac Lee, Kody Spano, Cody Green, and Latravis Washington. He has shown that he can throw a fairly long deep ball as well as the "pitch and catch" throws necessary in Nebraska's offense. He shows the ability to slide around within the pocket well, but his throwing mechanics are slightly off. There seems to be a little too much "arm work" before the release and he holds the ball out too far so that it may be knocked out of his hand for a fumble.

Martinez's future is a jumble right now, but the old axiom of being "one injury away" still rings true. Most notably, perhaps, is that he was named the team, league, and division MVP as a high school senior in 2008.

## GRADE

The first "full" Pelini recruiting class is pretty solid top to bottom. It addressed most of the team's needs, however there is still a need for a true play-making defensive tackle. That is a position that Nebraska appears to be addressing very seriously in its upcoming 2010 class. That said, when you have athletes like Cody Green, Rex Burkhead, Chris Williams, and Dijon Washington in your class, you're doing a pretty good job. The improvement in overall quality is enough to give this class a notch over last year's at a firm B+. **MSP**

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# MEET THE 2009 WALK-ONS

*by Brandon Cavanaugh*

**T**he life of a major college program walk-on is not a glamorous one. Walk-ons must pay their own way, make a living on the scout team, and otherwise bust their bodies in the hopes of one day getting on the field. If they're good enough, they might be awarded a scholarship for their days of sweat, blood, and tears.

At Nebraska, walk-ons are looked at differently than at other major programs. They are the kids that come from small town Nebraska and, in some cases, small towns from across the country because they just want an opportunity to put on a helmet with a cream shell and the red letter "N" on the side. The hope is that they make a name for themselves, much like Grand Island's Todd Peterson. Peterson started his Husker career as a walk-on and finished as one of the most important players on the offense in 2008.

The walk-on doesn't get wooed by coaches during the recruiting process in the same fashion as Johnny Five-Star, at Nebraska he gets some attention. Nebraska gave attention to the right kids this year in offering them the chance to join the program. Much in the same fashion as the breakdown of Nebraska's 2009 scholarship recruiting class, watching film of the walk-ons proved to be just as entertaining in the thoughts of who may climb up through the ranks.

Some notable 2009 walk-ons to watch in the coming years:

## **Long Snapper P.J. Mangieri—Peoria, IL**

As a long snapper, Mangieri does one thing well and that one thing guarantees him a four-year starting spot. Yes, he is that good. If he someday makes an NFL roster, he could be pulling down upwards of \$300,000 for his long snapping abilities alone. That's how important they are to a program.

What can you say about a good long snapper except it's obvious that Mangieri has been practicing for quite some time? Any good kick will start with Mangieri. A properly

snapped ball will arrive crisply to the holder at which point it will be placed in the proper position to be pummeled by the foot of a kicker.

Punters won't be hurt by P.J.'s presence either. He gets a great snap off and will make some lucky ones look good. It's not a notable position, but the long snapper helps to win games just as much as the kicker.

## **Tight End Jake Long—Elkhorn, NE**

One of two Long brothers from Elkhorn, Jake comes in looking to make a dent in an already stacked tight end depth chart. Jake is going to wind up very good at blocking and picking up the short 5–10 yard routes. He doesn't blow you away with speed, but that's not his purpose. He is a reliable "possession" type of receiver and that is enough to someday get him on the field.

## **Defensive End Spencer Long—Elkhorn, NE**

The Long brothers are a coup along with Mangieri because they could have gone to a smaller school and played, but sticking it out with Nebraska is one of the luckiest things a Cornhusker fan could hope for. Spencer spent some time playing on the offensive side of the ball, but it's clear that he is a mauler and belongs on defense. Being a mauler will get you places even as a walk-on. Ask 2006 special teams standout and team captain Brandon Rigoni how that worked out for him.

## **Offensive Lineman Brandon Chapek—Wahoo, NE**

Chapek comes in with the same mauler attitude as Spencer Long. He has a mean streak that would be nice to see a little more of in Nebraska's scholarship recruits this year. Chapek has good size at 6'5" and 320 pounds, but he represents raw potential. Chapek could surprise some of his new teammates.



### Quarterback Ron Kellog, Jr.—Omaha, NE

Omaha Westside's Ron Kellog Jr. definitely has some "get up and go," but a concern is that he might use it a little too often. He'll have to learn when it's appropriate to take off and when he has to let a play develop.

Kellog has a nice arm when standing in the pocket, and, while his throws are on a rope, the fear is that at this point they'd be easy prey for a defensive back or even a well-placed linebacker or defensive end. That said, Kellog looks promising if he can develop over the next year or two.

### Tight End Robert Barry—Battle Creek, NE

Robert Barry will be switching to tight end after playing quarterback in high school. Like Jake Long, Barry doesn't have stunning speed but has good hands for short routes. At 6'8" with a 31-inch vertical leap, he has the ability to go up for the jump ball. If he catches touchdowns just doing that, he'll earn a scholarship. As a side note, it's not so bad that he's from a place called Battle Creek.

### Wide Receiver Nick Failla—Omaha, NE

There's one thing that should be pointed out about Nick Failla: He's not your average wide receiver. Nick spent his high school playing time at quarterback as a Wing-bone specialist for the Millard North Mustangs. Failla is quicker than a hiccup, a requirement when you're playing quarterback in that offense. He could become an interesting Todd

Peterson-Nate Swift hybrid. People were a bit down on Swift's deceptive speed but Nick's is pretty obvious.

Also joining Nebraska in a walk-on capacity are:

- Offensive Lineman Dwight Jones—Gretna, NE
- Wide Receiver Ty Kildow—Omaha, NE
- Wide Receiver Tyson Clark—Lincoln, NE
- Long Snapper Adam Kuhl—Maple Valley, IA
- Linebacker Devin Paulsen—Lincoln, NE
- Linebacker Colby Starkebaum—Sterling, CO
- Tight End Brett Wells—St. Paul, NE
- Defensive End Keifer Burke—Maxwell, NE
- Defensive Tackle Colin Kanne—Omaha, NE
- Offensive Lineman Brodrick Nickens—Alliance, NE

A short list, admittedly, but the fun comes in watching them develop as they establish their Husker careers. Perhaps one or more of them can turn out to be the next Matt Turman, Brandon Rigoni, or Todd Peterson. Head Coach Bo Pelini has shown that he is more than willing to give everyone a chance to prove themselves. What they do with that opportunity is up to them. **MSP**

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A lifetime Omaha native and owner of BC Consultation, Brandon Cavanaugh has evaluated high school players as a member of *Scout.com* and as an independent sports consultant.



*Nebraska is unique in that walk-ons are treated as equals with the scholarship players, and viewed as heroes by their hometowns across the state.*





# THE POWER OF RED... SHIRTS

## Building for the Future

*by Darren Carlson*

**F**or those in need of a college football vocabulary test, this is not an article about jerseys or color schemes. It's about players—preserving, developing, and effectively using players. This is about redshirts.

“Redshirting” is a technique used by programs and players across the country to extend eligibility by one year, thereby increasing the development of players. Under former Husker coach Bill Callahan, redshirt seasons didn't have much value. In Bo Pelini's first year at the helm, redshirt seasons were preserved—sometimes at significant risk—to enhance the long-term roster health of the program. The resulting depth could provide a significant reward for NU in 2009 and beyond.

### DEFINE THE TERMS

First, just a little bit more on what a “redshirt” is. A redshirt player is officially on the team. They are on scholarship. They

practice and work out with the team, and they attend classes. What a redshirt player cannot do is participate in any games throughout the redshirt season.

Players take redshirt seasons at various times, but they typically will redshirt during their freshman year, in order to gain more of the physical and mental development needed to compete in college. Thus, the term “redshirt freshman”—designating a player who sat out their first season on campus.

The redshirted moniker can often follow a player through their eligibility (“He's a redshirted sophomore,” etc.). It's also given rise to a number of variants, such as a medical redshirt (a year sat out due to injury) and “grayshirt” which is a term often used in recruiting circles to describe a player who joined the team as a walk-on, paying their own way for a semester or a year, with a verbal agreement from coaches to be given a scholarship later. Finally, because redshirting



means a player has five academic years to use four years of sports eligibility, it gave rise to the term “fifth-year senior.”

Whew! That can be a lot to get through. Now that the terms are roughly defined, it's important to know why they matter. College football can be a tough transition for some players. Redshirting players allow them to develop physically, mentally, and emotionally. Also, a redshirt season gives a talented player the chance to preserve a year of eligibility, rather than waste it standing on the sideline waiting for a chance while older or more experienced players play in front of him.

Used properly, redshirting players lets a program develop quality depth. Many savvy and experienced coaches, at least those with the luxury of time, redshirt the majority of players in a recruiting class to create a flock of very experienced upper classmen in subsequent years. Coaches with less time or less perceived talent will opt not to redshirt players and put their talented newcomers on the field right away.

## QUANTITY AND QUALITY

Forget the BCS formulas; roster management is college football's ultimate numbers game. The coaches that manage, curate, and develop their roster of talent best usually win the most games. Redshirting players is one tried and true way to put the numbers more in your team's favor long-term. Consider the current Husker roster as the most recent example.

At the time of writing, there are officially 145 players listed as part of the 2009 Husker roster. Not all of them will be a part of the final roster of players for the season, of course, but, that's how many are listed on the team. Of that group, 39 of them are listed as redshirt freshmen. That's roughly 27% of the players on the NU squad. Now, throw in the 36 players listed as freshmen (meaning “true” freshmen) and you get 75 players (or 51% of the team) that could likely be on the roster four years from now. Redshirting scads of players in 2008 certainly tilted the numbers game in Nebraska's favor for the long-term.

It is not just the quantity of players that the Huskers redshirted that matters. They kept the wraps on some pretty highly-regarded players in 2008 as well. Players who could have contributed during live game action in their first year dot the NU roster. By coaches' accounts, middle linebacker Will Compton could have played at any time last season. Fellow linebacker Sean Fisher and defensive end Cameron Meredith were called on to play when the Huskers were hit with a rash of injuries. Both played in a single game last season, and both were injured. Thankfully for Husker fans, both were granted another year of eligibility due to an injury after limited action—a “medical redshirt.” Other freshmen



*Bo Pelini redshirted many players that might have been able to help in his first season. Bill Callahan had little regard for the redshirt.*

may have been able to help out as kick returners or seen time in Nebraska's ever changing defensive backfield.

## RISK AND REWARD

A football season is a war of attrition. Injuries happen, and a team can get dangerously thin at certain spots. Nebraska is no different. The Huskers could have used some of those redshirt freshmen a season ago. Instead, the Husker coaches took a risk.

Because of injuries, the Husker linebacking corps got dangerously thin midway through last year. Rather than use Compton and others to fill the gaps created by these injuries, the Husker coaches turned to lesser known walk-ons, such as Colton Koehler and Mathew May, thus letting Compton and other players like Alonzo Whaley keep their redshirts intact. Lacking many players at tight end or linebacker, they might have turned to Ben Cotton for depth along the line of scrimmage or Jordan Makovicka for a lead blocker. Instead, the Huskers lined up with more wide receivers in the spread formation, and used a converted defensive tackle at fullback in goal line situations.

The risk appears to be paying off. It is often the case with college rosters—the units where a team was thinnest



or weakest one year is often deeper or more competitive the next. One look at NU's 2009 roster reveals a dearth of linebackers. This is due in no small part to the fact that six of them are redshirted freshmen. The same is true at tight end. After being rather thin there in 2008, the additions of redshirt frosh Kyler Reed and Ben Cotton to incumbents Mike McNeill and Dreu Young give the Huskers four tight ends they can count on in both the pass and run game.

## CONTINUAL DEVELOPMENT

So, redshirting players sounds like a sure fire, can't miss, must do item for incoming coaches, right? It's never quite that simple. Teams can't just put a pin in these guys for a year and wait. These players need to practice too. They need to be included in the team. They must work out like mad men to add the size and speed needed for the college game. In short, they need development.

This isn't high school. There is not a junior varsity squad to get younger players repetitions and opportunity. Most redshirt players end up taking a turn on the scout team where they spend the practice weeks preparing the front line starters for the opponent. They run the opponent's schemes and generally get their heads handed to them in most cases. Practices become their games, the experience toughening players to the rigors of college football (or weeding out those that won't make it).

They also need opportunities to drill and practice the regular schemes and plays. Many teams, Nebraska included, will try to build in some special practices for freshmen and redshirt freshmen to compete against each other while running the team's actual schemes. This usually occurs during a bye or off week. Sometimes, these young players have a designated day when they get extra practice time with coaches after the team's regular practice routine is over. The point is to keep them sharp and get them ready for next year.

With other players, it's less about keeping them sharp for next year and more about having them ready "just in case." For example, Compton never spent time with the scout team last season. All year, he drilled and prepared with the front line defense. He was listed as the Huskers second-string middle backer throughout the year. Teams will keep a freshman in the mix like this for many reasons, but mostly because they feel he has the ability to compete for that spot. If they don't need to use that season of eligibility, then it's a bonus and the player is all the more prepared for the next season.

## A SIGNIFICANT DEPARTURE

Not to be too much like the character Cliff Claven from the sitcom *Cheers*, but did you know that Nebraska is actually credited with redshirting the first player? In his book *Go*

*Big Red — The Ultimate Fan's Guide to Nebraska Cornhusker Football* (1998), Mike Babcock details the story of the late Warren Alfson.

As a linebacker and halfback for the Huskers, Alfson earned all-conference honors in both 1939 and 1940, and All-American honors in 1940 while helping the Huskers reach the Rose Bowl. Alfson accomplished all this after first taking a year off from football games and just practicing and conditioning with the team, and letting more experienced players ahead of him graduate. This distinction makes Alfson likely the first redshirt player in college football history.

Apparently all of this history and the depth-building roster advantages to redshirting players were lost to former Husker coach Bill Callahan. In his time with the Huskers, Callahan made a significant departure from the practice of redshirting, and played many freshmen. Both running back Marlon Lucky and defensive end Zach Potter were used as true freshmen. After minor contributions in those campaigns, many Husker fans can't help but wonder if those two players might have been of better use to the 2009 squad as fifth-year seniors instead. And, current Husker wide receiver Niles Paul enters his junior campaign with only a few contributions so far. It's hard not to think that a freshman season where he collected just one catch might have been better spent as a redshirt.

Pelini, conceivably confident that he has both a mandate to restock the program and a little more time to do so, has



*Cody Green may be the quarterback of the future, but his best move in 2009 would be a redshirt.*





*They might have to wait to get on the field, but redshirts are an integral part of building any top college football program.*

returned to the practice of preserving redshirt seasons. The football reasons have already been detailed. Pelini also does so for another, more personal reason. Pelini has said on multiple occasions that he thinks it is only fair to a player and his family to not waste an entire year of a player's eligibility over just a few games. He knows that these young men have a limited window of opportunity, and he does not want to squander it. If a player can make a significant impact in their first year, he'll play them. But, if the season passes a certain point (say, the midway point) Pelini has shown in at least one case that he'd rather just keep the player on the shelf for the whole year.

## THE UNVEILING BEGINS

So here come the redshirts in 2009. As many as 15 players who sat out last year could make an impact for the Huskers in the coming season. There are several to keep an eye on in addition to Compton, Meredith, Whaley, Cotton, Reed, and Makovicka, who have already been mentioned. You could see P.J. Smith playing some at safety, or Tim Marlowe returning punts and kicks. Super recruit Baker Steinkuhler appears in line for playing time at defensive line, as does the speedy Josh Williams at defensive end.

Rolling out the redshirts could make the Huskers more effective on special teams, too. When punt and kick teams are manned by physically ready players who are anxious to impress, the coverage tends to improve. And, frankly, the overall talent makeup of some of these scholarship redshirts is higher than some of the walk-on players the Huskers used on special teams a year ago. Using these redshirt freshmen on

special teams acclimates them to the speed of a real college game. It also allows coaches to protect their frontline offensive and defensive players from being injured on special teams.

There is another reason many fans are anxious to see this round of redshirt freshmen take the field. They are "Pelini's guys." With very few exceptions, this will be the first opportunity to get a game assessment of the caliber of player that Pelini and his staff recruit. The caliber of player a coach recruits is no small thing. How will they hold up? Can they perform in the Big 12?

By no means is it fair to consider the performance of a redshirt freshman entirely indicative of the kind of career he will have. But, if the talent is there, you'll know. You can't hide a burst of speed (or the lack of it), natural offensive skills, the will to be physical, or an incredible nose for the ball. For those fans hoping for the best from Pelini as a recruiter, this is the first look at the goods.

## BUILDING THE NEW FOUNDATION

The word "rebuilding" gets thrown around college sports quite a bit. Coaches are always trying to build up a program, often in their own image. If the Husker football program was like a reclamation project when Pelini found it, then this first class of redshirted players is essentially his pouring of a new foundation.

Gone are the days when talented players are squandered for just a few catches, carries, or blocks. Instead, they are sent to the weight room and practice squad for more hard-earned growth. While there is risk in leaving certain spots a bit undermanned, the overall depth at positions improves. We'll see the first vestiges of that in 2009.

This new foundation creates the sturdy metaphorical building in the years to come. Floor by floor, it is built based on stockpiling and developing quality players. The concrete poured by preserving players' redshirt seasons can lead to great pinnacles and spires in the form of fifth-year seniors. **MSP**

Darren K. Carlson is a writer (and confirmed football junkie) living in Omaha, with his wife and their daughter. He writes and edits for *Big Red Network*, a website dedicated to covering Husker football every day.



# Has Recruiting Gotten Out Of Hand?

## by Jon Johnston

I'll admit, I don't follow recruiting very closely. It's not that I'm not interested in the young footballers, it's that I don't trust my judgment as much as I trust the Nebraska coaching staff to make the right decisions about the players they choose to become the next set of Cornhuskers.

However, there are a lot of people who follow college football recruiting as if it were bigger than the game itself. So much so that websites such as Rivals.com and Scout.com make a pretty good sum of money by charging for subscriptions to their content, which isn't that big a deal until you realize that the newspaper industry is dying because people won't pay subscription fees for news that matters.

Reading Bruce Feldman's book *Meat Market: Inside the Smash-Mouth World of College Football Recruiting* will make you convinced that anyone involved in the process is insane. Coaches fly all over the country to spend a few minutes in the home of a teenager hoping to convince them that "powerhouse football U" is the place they need to be. Recruits fly all over the country to spend a little time on each campus to make sure the fit is right. College football fans follow their every move, looking at online videos, and reviewing stats and scores as if the playing fields were level throughout the nation.

Then there's the gimmicks. We love them when they're ours, such as Mike Ekeler using a temporary tattoo to woo Will Compton, but hate them when they're someone else's—especially when they're over the top. A prime example of over the top was Jimmy Clausen's announcement that he was going to play quarterback at Notre Dame. He made the announcement at the College Football Hall of Fame after arriving in a stretch Hummer limousine, then proudly went on to announce that that his goal was to win four national titles for the Fighting Irish. I'll admit that I've cheered for Clausen to fail ever since. That's what going over the top will get you—a whole bunch of sports hatred.

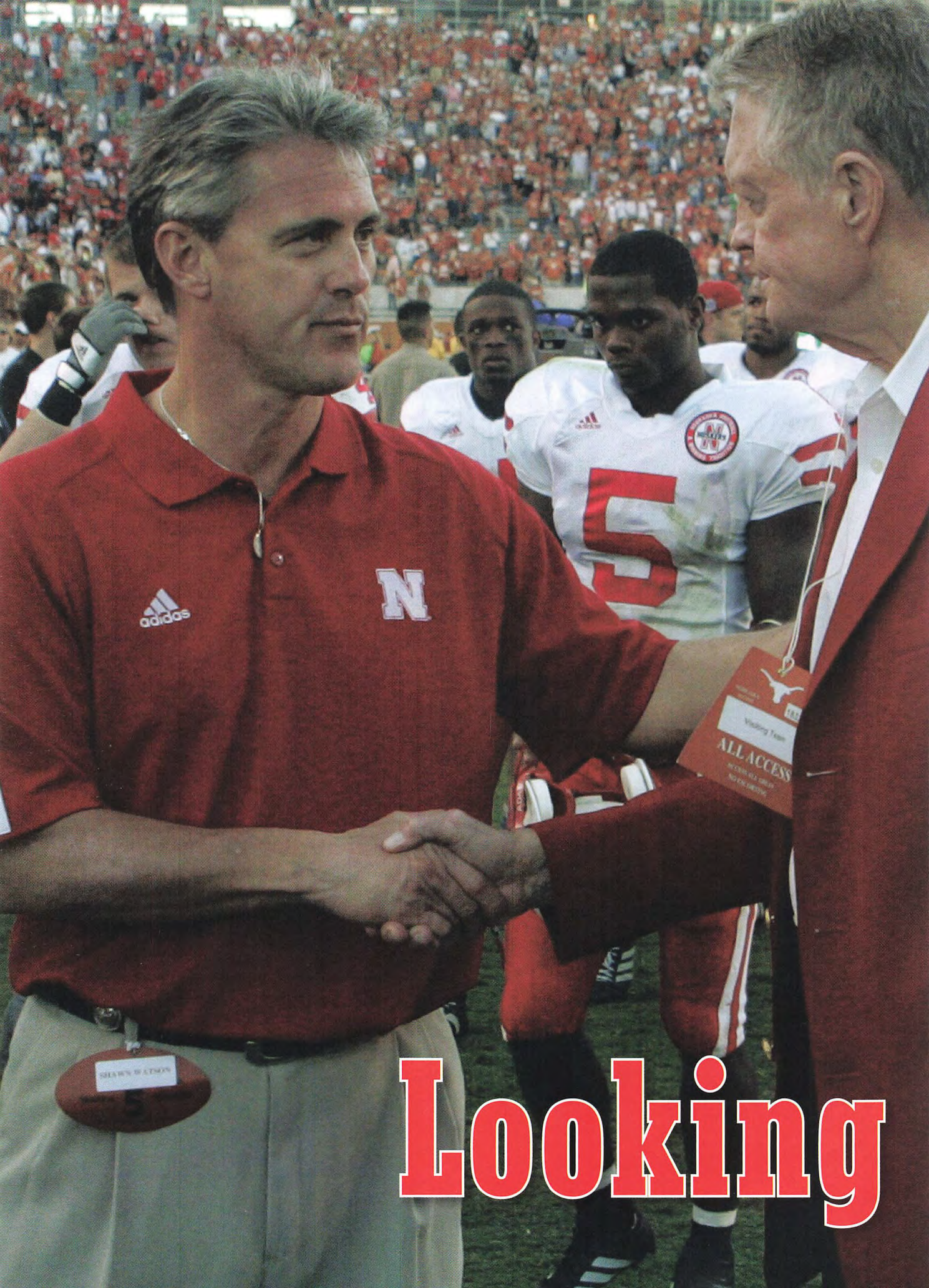
If it seems like things have gotten out of hand, it might be best to check history for a guide. Author James E. Sherwood notes in his book *Nebraska Football: The Coaches, The Players, The Experience* that during the "recruitment" of Husker legend Guy Chamberlin, "Players from Nebraska literally laid siege to the Chamberlin farm over the summer of 1913 to convince Guy to attend NU." John Sayle Watterson's *College Football* relates with unrelenting detail how difficult it was to regulate "subsidies" in the 1920s.

This year's edition of Cornhusker Kickoff found me contacting high schools in order to obtain publicity photos of the 2009 recruiting class. I found myself for the first time communicating with a number of high school coaches about recruits. It struck me odd how rational they were. Don't they know they're supposed to be crazy?



*Recruiting may seem like a crazy business, but it's always been crazy. In fact, it may have settled down somewhat since the early days of football.*





# Looking





# THE STATE OF HUSKER ATHLETICS

## An Interview With Tom Osborne

*by Steve Sipple*

**A**s a student-athlete at Hastings (NE) College during the late 1950s, Tom Osborne recalls making occasional trips to watch Nebraska football games in Lincoln.

This was the period right before Bob Devaney's arrival, a period during which the Huskers were losing more games than they were winning.

"I can remember a lot of empty seats when Memorial Stadium seated about 35,000 people," Osborne said. "Of course, when Bob came in 1962, the stadium was sold out. And it's been sold out ever since."

Osborne, the former Nebraska head coach (1973–97) and current Husker athletic director, cites fan loyalty and the resulting ticket revenue—\$30 million from football alone in 2008—as the main reason the Nebraska athletic department has been able to remain on solid ground financially over the years, including nowadays even during the roughest economic times in the United States since the Great Depression. He estimates the athletic department, which has 23 sports and a \$76 million budget, is "probably between three and four million in the black."

"It's been unbelievable, really, the devotion of the average Nebraska fan," Osborne said. "They tend to be a little more committed and maybe a little more patient than most fans. Of course, there was a period of 40-some years of pretty sustained success, which I think had something to do with enhancing that commitment."

Osborne doesn't take for granted Nebraska's 297 straight home football sellouts. In fact, as the Huskers struggled to a 5–7 record in 2007, Osborne noted, along with the rest of Husker Nation, the empty seats around the

# Forward





*Husker fans enjoy one of the best gameday experiences in the nation.*

stadium even at the start of games. The sellout streak remained intact because the seats were paid for, but those empty seats, as few as they were, made one wonder if Husker fans would forever keep filing into the venerable venue on Stadium Drive if the team continued to struggle.

Osborne pondered that question, among others, in November of 2007 during his decision-making process to fire Bill Callahan and hire Bo Pelini as Nebraska's head football coach.

"I think when a place has been sold out for as long as this one has, the assumption is it's always going to be sold out," Osborne said. "But I feel our fans, even as devoted as they are, and as faithful as they are, if they go through enough discouragement, well, they're human. I don't think there's hardly any place in the country that's impervious to a decline in ticket sales.

"You saw it at Oklahoma [in the 1990s]. I'm sure back in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, people in Oklahoma said there's no way we'd have an empty seat at OU. In the 1990s, with three or four losing seasons, they had empty seats. I know the university ended up having to give the athletic department some money, made a loan, to help keep the athletic department going. So, it can happen."

Oklahoma struggled in the wake of the Barry Switzer era ending in 1988, as the Sooners experienced sustained mediocrity under three head coaches (Gary Gibbs, Howard Schnellenberger, and John Blake) before Bob Stoops' arrival in 1999.

"The thing about it is, we're expected to stand alone here at Nebraska, and I don't expect a bailout from the state or from

the university," Osborne continued. "If we saw a significant decline in revenue, what you'd have to look at would be, well, do we eliminate personnel? Do we freeze salaries? Do we freeze hiring? There are sports that would need to be eliminated. So, you make all those kind of decisions.

"Sometimes people have complained about Bo's salary. I think it's important they realize that we have to stand on our own two feet here as an athletic department. It can go the other way as well as go well. Probably the most expensive thing is to have a football team that's not productive. Because men's basketball makes a little money, and the remaining 21 sports are dependent on football in some way for survival. We have to make sure football's strong."

The 72-year-old Osborne is relaxed as he discusses a variety of topics with a reporter in his large North Stadium office. He keeps a very busy schedule but doesn't seem overwhelmed at all. By all accounts, he's enjoying his work and actually seems energized, according to friends. As for his immediate tasks, he mentions two significant projects that are in the works: The Nebraska Student Life Complex, and a proposed basketball, wrestling, and gymnastics practice facility.

Fundraising is complete for the \$10.5 million student life complex, and construction is scheduled to begin this summer. The target completion date is fall of 2010. When everything's finished, academic space for Husker student-athletes will nearly triple in size, as the current Hewitt Center, located in the west part of Memorial Stadium, will expand into the former weight room.

"We've been awfully cramped," Osborne said.

In March, the Tom Hendricks family of Omaha gave \$10 million toward the basketball, wrestling, and gymnastics practice facility, estimated to cost \$17 million. The facility likely will connect to the Devaney Sports Center, to the north or south of the indoor track. Nebraska hopes to begin construction in August 2010.

"I think that's going to be really important if we're going to have a highly competitive basketball program," Osborne said. "I just don't see right now, with the general landscape in college athletics, any way to do well in basketball without it."

In addition to the two major projects, "We're in the process of looking at a 10-year overall assessment of facilities and anticipated needs," Osborne said. "That's going to tell us a lot. Because we have no idea whether we need to put \$2 million or \$50 million into Memorial Stadium. You know, it's not ancient [its first season was 1923], but it's getting older. We want to make sure there are no surprises.



"It's the same way with the Devaney Sports Center. We know we have to put at least \$10 million into the Devaney just to maintain the building, and maybe it's going to be \$15 million or \$20 million. Of course, we're quite anxious to see what the public's going to decide a year from now on the [downtown] arena. If a new arena doesn't come through, we're going to have to do some things with the Devaney to make it more fan-friendly, maybe put in some kind of special seating, some skyboxes. That's going to cost some money."

Osborne notes that the Nebraska athletic department also deals with the rising expenses that challenge most businesses, such as costs related to travel, energy, insurance, and salaries.

Ah, salaries. Osborne raised eyebrows in March when he gave Pelini a 68% increase in pay from the initial deal he signed 14 months earlier. The raise elevated Pelini's annual salary to \$1.851 million, a sum that places him seventh among Big 12 head football coaches. Pelini's salary in his first year as NU head coach was \$1.1 million, which, according to Internet and newspaper compilations, ranked near the bottom of the Big 12.

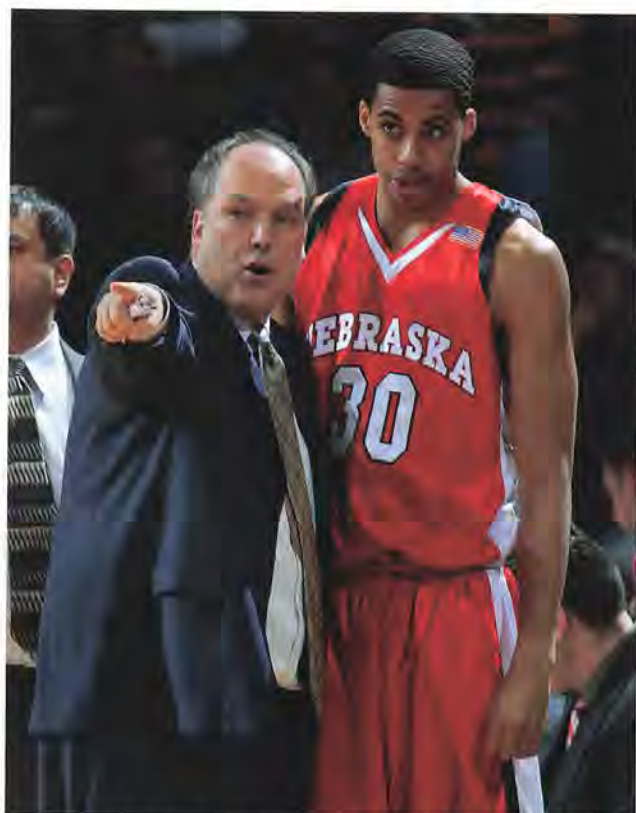
"It's a very large raise," Osborne said. "But on the other hand, when you look at the fact that last year football provided 85 percent of the revenue of the whole athletic department, you realize that there's a lot of responsibility that goes with this job and that Bo needs to be paid accordingly."

The subject of Pelini's pay is interesting in part because he happens to work at a school that's managed to avoid paying excessive sums of money to head football coaches, at least compared to some other traditional powerhouse programs (for instance, Bob Stoops of Oklahoma leads the Big 12 at \$3.8 million annually, with Mack Brown of Texas next at \$3.1 million). Pelini now will be making slightly more than Callahan, whose salary was \$1.75 million when he was fired in November of 2007.

It's very possible that the subject of Pelini's pay will continue to arise in coming years in large part because of the lasting impression he made as a defensive coordinator at Louisiana State in the Southeastern Conference. The SEC last season had nine head coaches making at least \$1.8 million per season (compensation includes base salary plus income from such areas as camps, TV, radio, and equipment contracts). LSU Head Coach Les Miles reportedly makes \$3.75 million annually.

Of course, Pelini's name arising in any league is contingent on Nebraska continuing to be successful, which at the moment seems very likely.

The escalation of coaches' salaries in big-time college sports "is surprising to some degree," said Osborne, whose first salary as Nebraska's head coach in 1973 was \$25,000.



*Doc Sadler has Husker basketball fans excited. The team should have a new practice facility in the not too distant future.*

"But you realize it's a very competitive environment. Those people who are paying those kind of high salaries evidently feel it's justified and cost effective, and that's why they're doing it. Of course, with those escalated salaries comes very high expectations and probably less patience and a shorter window in which to accomplish whatever you're supposed to accomplish.

"It's kind of a tradeoff. Some people who are upset with the high salaries have to realize that with that comes a tremendous amount of scrutiny and a very high level of expectation. It doesn't come without a price."

In helping explain Pelini's raise, Osborne reiterated his contention that, "Probably the most expensive thing is to have a football team that's not productive." For example, consider that schools typically must not only fork out millions of dollars for a new head coach and his staff, but also simultaneously pay off the outgoing staff (after firing Callahan, Nebraska paid him \$3.125 million in a lump sum under terms of his contract).

Hardly anyone would dispute that Pelini made a major impact in 2008 in his first full season as Nebraska head coach—and first season as a head coach anywhere (his nine wins tied him for the most among the 18 first-year head coaches last fall in major college football). Regarded as one





*Nebraska volleyball continues to be one of the best programs in the nation under the guidance of Head Coach John Cook.*

of the college game's foremost defensive coaches, Pelini coaxed the Huskers to finish 55th nationally in total defense after they finished 112th in 2007. He obviously was effective instituting a winning culture. He emphasized the importance of building relationships and trust among players and coaches alike. He also emphasized hard work and commitment and late in the season made sure to praise the resolve of the players, particularly the 21 seniors.

Resolve? Well, consider Nebraska turned in two of its strongest performances the weeks immediately following blowout losses to Missouri (52-17 on October 4 in Lincoln) and Oklahoma (62-28 on November 1 in Norman). After falling to Mizzou, NU pushed then-seventh-ranked Texas Tech to overtime before losing 37-31—a defeat that marked the season's turning point, according to Pelini.

Nebraska followed its loss at Tech with victories against Iowa State (35-7) and Baylor (32-20). Then came the Huskers' loss to then-fourth-ranked Oklahoma, which was immediately followed by NU's 45-35 home win against Kansas, the first of four straight triumphs to end the season.

Osborne naturally was very pleased with the progress he saw in the program. The

athletic director also notes the 41-year-old Pelini's progress as a young head coach. For instance, Osborne points to Pelini's improved sideline demeanor as the season progressed, saying Bo's progress in that area was "excellent." (Pelini tends to get, ahem, fired up at times by referees' calls as well as mistakes by his team, a la Bobby Knight).

Was there a point last season when Osborne felt he should address the matter with Pelini?

"I think Bo recognized it himself," Osborne said. "It wasn't horrible [behavior]. But on the other hand, he realized that people are watching. Mothers are watching. And fathers. You saw a pretty marked shift from the first two or three games to the last six or seven. I thought that was very positive."

Osborne also praises Pelini's ability to be active in helping coach both the defense and offense.

"As a coordinator, you're highly focused on one side of the ball and a set number of players," Osborne said. "As a head coach, you have to be concerned about the whole thing, and Bo was quite interested in how the offense and defense interact and help each other. In other words, if the offense controls the ball, and you're struggling a little on defense, it really helps."

"I thought Bo did a good job of interacting with [offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach] Shawn Watson and trying to make sure they were operating at an optimal level, depending on what the offense was contributing and what the defense was capable of doing."

Osborne also is impressed with the coaching staff Pelini put together.

"I thought the chemistry and interaction among staff members and Bo was good," Osborne said. "You didn't see a lot of adversarial relationships. Everybody was pulling



*Nebraska's baseball stadium, Haymarket Park, is one of the best in the nation, proving Nebraska's dedication to excellence in all sports.*



together. And I thought Bo's ability to handle players and maintain discipline, and yet at the same time have the players want to play for him, was a good combination."

What's more, "I thought recruiting has progressively gotten better, increasingly organized," Osborne said. "It's hard to come in kind of right in the middle of a recruiting season and put together a staff and still recruit a reasonably good number of players. I think they did that well the first year. And of course, I think this year is going to be an improvement on that. All of those things I thought were encouraging."

Indeed, Nebraska fans seem energized and optimistic entering the 2009 season. No question, such optimism has financial ramifications for dear old NU. Indeed, how crucial is the Huskers' football success—and continued sellouts for home football games—to the athletic department from a budget standpoint? Well, consider that nearly half of the department's \$76 million budget in 2007–08 is covered by ticket sales, including \$30 million from football, according to the *Lincoln Journal Star*. TV revenues, sponsorships, and rights fees, a large percentage coming from marketing partner IMG, cover another \$20 million or so.

The remainder comes mostly from donations, including those made to enjoy games in Memorial Stadium suites. Of the 29 West Stadium skyboxes that were up for renewal following the 2008 season, all have been leased, according to the *Journal Star*. The majority were new 10-year deals at \$85,000 per year. Others went for five years at \$90,000 annually. The original 10-year leases were for \$75,000 a year.

Football and men's basketball remain the only Husker sports to clear a profit, although baseball came close in 2008, with expenses exceeding revenues by only \$34,000. Volleyball, which approached \$1 million in ticket sales in 2007–08, still lost \$240,000, according to the *Journal Star*.

Osborne feels comfortable running day-to-day athletic department operations. He reminds people that in Devaney's latter years as NU athletic director, Osborne served as assistant athletic director as well as head coach. Under Devaney, Osborne delved into football scheduling and even some areas of the budget.

After retiring as Nebraska head coach following the 1997 season, Osborne served six years in the US House of Representatives. In May 2006, he lost in the Republican primary for governor to incumbent Dave Heineman. Osborne then began teaching at Nebraska's College of Business Administration and doing some consulting for athletics at Creighton University in Omaha, and Iowa Western Community College. He also did speaking engagements. He



*The athletic department's worst fear would be a stadium full of empty seats, as ticket sales provide nearly half of the department's revenues.*

found that he had more free time on his hands, he says.

Of course, that changed in October of 2007 when Osborne received a call from Nebraska Chancellor Harvey Perlman asking Osborne to succeed Steve Pederson immediately as Nebraska athletic director. Now, the question is: Will Osborne keep his A.D. job beyond the end of his two-and-a-half-year appointment (his original agreement was to work through June 2010).

"I haven't given much thought to it, really," Osborne said. "You know, there are some things in the works here, like the practice facility and the possibility of a new downtown arena. Some of these things stretch out a ways into the future. But I have not stated any particular preference at this point, and it's really dependent upon the chancellor and what he envisions needs to happen here."

Husker sports fans like to speculate about Osborne's successor. "Hot" names that typically arise are former Husker All-Americans Trev Alberts and Dave Rimington as well as Paul Meyers, Nebraska associate athletic director for development.

"I will not be making that decision," Osborne said. "There'll undoubtedly be a search committee, and I'm not even sure I'd be part of that search committee."

But he would have input, right?

"I would think so, yes, but I don't know," Osborne said. "There are no guarantees. There are all kinds of ways hires are made. At this point, I've not received any indication that we're going to start that process. I would assume it'd be a four- to six-month process."

Osborne keeps his focus on his current job, and there's obviously plenty of work to keep him occupied. **MSP**

Steve Sipple is in his 18th year at the *Lincoln Journal Star*. The two-time Nebraska sportswriter of the year spent 12 seasons as the beat writer for the Nebraska football team. The 2007 season marked his first year as the *LJS'* columnist for Husker sports and coordinator of Husker football coverage.



# Memorial Stadium Sellout Streak

by Jon Johnston

*When Louisiana-Lafayette comes to Lincoln on September 26, the Memorial Stadium sellout streak will hit 300 games. The streak started on November 3, 1962 when the Huskers lost a homecoming game to Missouri, 16-7. It was Bob Devaney's first season and 36,501 fans watched Nebraska's only home loss of the year.*

*Here's a look back at the milestone games through the streak.*

## 25 • September 30, 1967

Joe Orduna scored to give the Huskers a 7-0 win over Minnesota as 65,347 fans watched the Husker defense hold the Gophers to three rushing yards.

## 50 • October 2, 1971

67,421 fans saw the Huskers destroy Utah State 42-6. Nebraska was ranked #1 and would finish the season with a national title.

## 75 • Sept 27, 1975

Lead by Vince Ferragamo, 75,931 fans watched as fourth-ranked Nebraska pummeled Texas Christian (TCU) 56-14.

## 100 • September 29, 1979

18th-ranked Penn State jumped out to a 14-0 first quarter lead, but the sixth-ranked Huskers stormed back with 28 points in the second quarter to roll to a 42-17 win. 76,151 were in attendance.

## 125 • September 24, 1983

UCLA lead 10-0 early in the second quarter before the "Scoring Explosion" offense kicked in, scoring 42 unanswered points to win 42-10. The game

featured Mike Rozier's Heisman-winning touchdown run. On third-and-2 from the two yard line, Rozier ran all the way to the left sideline on a pitch play, then cut back to the right, going all the way back to the 17 yard line before running into the end zone near the right sideline, covering over 80 yards

## 150 • Sept 12, 1987

Third-ranked UCLA met second-ranked Nebraska as Steve Taylor threw five touchdown passes on the way to a 42-33 win.

## 200 • October 29, 1994

Third-ranked Nebraska dominated second-ranked Colorado, 24-7, in a game that gave the Huskers the #1 ranking over Penn State on the way to another national title. Brook Berringer and Lawrence Phillips were the stars while the Husker defense crushed the hopes of Kordell Stewart and Rasham Salaam.

## 250 • September 7, 2002

78,176 watched as Jammal Lord and the Husker offense smashed Utah State on their way to a 44-13 win.

## 300 • September 29, 2009

Louisiana-Lafayette comes to town...





# THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Lack of a Clear-cut Favorite Should Make the North Division Race the Most Interesting in Years

by Darren Carlson

**S**ave for the Rocky Mountains, the Big 12's North Division is comprised of wide open spaces, and expansive horizons. Heck, even much of Colorado is prairie land. When one scans that horizon, it is pretty easy to see something coming, but that may not be the case for 2009's race to capture the North Division. The plains appear dotted with many teams either in transition or rebuilding, creating considerable debate about which one will land on top by season's end, and earn a place in the Big 12 title game.

A cursory review of the six team division yields this snap judgment: Two teams could be considered long shots as they are completely rebuilding, two other teams face several unknowns but are carrying significant expectations, and the last two teams appear to have the momentum heading into 2009. Digging into team personnel, schedules, and various other factors reveals which teams are which.

## THE LONG SHOTS

Off in the distance, tucked among Iowa's cornfields and sunflower fields in Kansas, you will find the teams that are the least likely to capture the North Division. Kansas State and Iowa State are more likely battling to stay out of the Big 12 cellar this season. Both have new coaches who face major rebuilding jobs.

At Kansas State, everything old is new again. Or, at least Wildcat fans are hoping for a return to their more recent past as former coach Bill Snyder returns to the helm. Snyder, who will turn 70 this season, will need the wisdom of experience and the energy of a man half his age if he hopes to reclaim quality football from what Ron Prince left him.

At first blush, it doesn't look too bad for KSU. They return a respectable 16 starters, many of them in their second year at KSU after being at junior colleges. But, then you realize that returning players from a squad that was 5-7



overall and 2–6 in the conference a year ago probably isn't a great thing. Complicating matters further is that there is a lot more unknown than known at the quarterback position. Josh Freeman departed for the NFL, leaving Carson Coffman the only experienced quarterback on the roster. Transfers Grant Gregory and Daniel Thomas will compete for the job as well.

In fact, Snyder himself was openly critical of his team's performance during his first spring back as their new head football coach. It might be a wise coach trying to motivate his team. Or it could be that this team genuinely lacks the talent profile of a Big 12 contender.

There is a little bit of hope for KSU in the form of the early schedule. Three of their non-conference games appear to be winnable, with UCLA being the only likely exception. Then, they face Iowa State to open conference play. So, the team might get a decent start and have some momentum. But, the Big 12 schedule yields almost no breaks, and the Wildcats must finish the year with games at Oklahoma and then play Kansas, Missouri, and at Nebraska in consecutive weeks. Ouch. The KSU faithful would be wise to trust in Snyder and brace for impact.

Things are almost as daunting for new Iowa State head man Paul Rhoads. He takes over after big-name hire Gene

Chizik went 5–19 and bolted for Auburn. Nice. Rhoads, an assistant under former ISU coach Dan McCarney, was born not far from Ames and genuinely cares about the program. Clearly Chizik did not. Rhoads had better care, because leading a team that won just two games last year (0–8 in the Big 12) takes real guts.

New coordinators on both sides of the ball will bring scheme changes to a Cyclone squad that returns 17 starters (nine on defense). On offense, ISU will try the en vogue, no-huddle spread to try and generate more points. Last year's Cyclone defense was dreadful, but young. Another year of experience for those young players might create a stiffer challenge to opponents.

Like Kansas State, Iowa State may find the opportunity to win some games in their non-conference schedule. But, the conference slate includes road games against the three teams most people feel have the best chance to win the division: Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Two Big 12 North coaches are saddled with more expectations than all the others. One set of expectations is born from recent on-field performance, the other stems from big talk at booster banquets. In both cases, these coaches will need several variables to turn in their direction if they are to get a leg up on competitors in the wide open North.

Missouri's Gary Pinkel has earned high expectations among his fan base. His Tigers have won or tied for the division crown the last two years, both times notching double-digit win totals. But departures of players and coaches will make the Tigers have to claw very hard to win the division for the third straight year.

Missouri returns just 10 starters from a year ago, and key playmakers on both sides of the ball are now playing football on Sundays. There is still talent on the roster, though. Sean Weatherspoon can lead the defense and running back Derrick Washington should power the running game, but there are questions at quarterback. Blaine Gabbert has the physical gifts, but can he make the plays that the diminutive Chase Daniel always seemed to?

Potentially an even bigger challenge for Missouri is the departure of both their offensive and defensive coordinators. Pinkel likely ensured consistency by elevating current staff members to those roles, but turnover on the coaching staff can stifle momentum.

Fans will know a lot about Missouri early in the year, as they face out-of-conference rival Illinois to open the season. They must also play at Nevada early in the season. If Missouri can endure the early tests, they have some good conference scheduling for 2009, drawing Nebraska to Columbia for a Thursday night game, getting Big 12 South foe Texas at



*Bill Snyder has to be wondering what he's gotten himself into in returning to Kansas State.*





*Gary Pinkel's 2009 team is loaded with youth, meaning they have a ways to go before they can expect to win the North again.*

home, and playing Kansas on a neutral field to end the year. This will be a year when Missouri either proves to be a consistent force in the Big 12 or they slide back to the pack after some time at the top.

On the other hand, Colorado has proven to be anything but consistent under Dan Hawkins. Entering his fourth season, Hawkins is just 13–24 overall. So why, then, did he spout the phrase “10 wins and no excuses” during an off-season booster banquet? Probably to silence the critics just a bit. He also just raised the stakes on himself, and made the hottest coaching seat in the conference a bit hotter. So, can the Buffalos capture the division? Certainly. But, like every team in the North, there are a few issues.

While Colorado returns 17 starters from a year ago, just five of them play on defense. On the other side of the ball, the Buffaloes may have a potent pair of backs in Darrell Scott and Rodney “Speedy” Steward (great name) but there are issues throughout the rest of the offense. For the Buffaloes to contend they must get better and more consistent quarterback play from either Cody Hawkins or Tyler Hansen. Will that come from new offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau after Mark Helfrich left for a job with Oregon? Hawkins certainly has to hope so.

Beating 10 of the teams on CU’s schedule won’t be an easy task. None of their non-conference tilts (Colorado State, at Toledo, Wyoming, at West Virginia) are gimmie games. The conference schedule features the contenders (Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri) at home and the weaker teams (Iowa State and Kansas State) on the road, which is favorable. But, the Southern slate for the Buffs features games at Texas early

in the year and at Oklahoma State later in the season. Neither will be easy. Hawkins can talk about 10 wins, but it might be wiser to focus on 8, since that would put them in the thick of the Big 12 North race.

### **GREAT PLAINS FAVORITES?**

While neither has won an outright North Division title in the last two years, most people consider Nebraska and Kansas the early favorites to win it in 2009. Why? In a word, momentum. Sure, it can be tough to carry over energy, effort, and consistency from the previous season, but few teams in the Big 12 ended on as much of an up note as Kansas and Nebraska did last year.

The Huskers were victorious in four of their last five regular season games, and won the Gator Bowl over Clemson in comeback fashion. The Huskers started to gain a sense of their former selves under first year coach Bo Pelini, but, with offensive leaders departing and defensive leaders emerging, this might be a very different Husker squad.

The departure of quarterback Joe Ganz and his top two receivers leaves an offensive void to fill. Can Zac Lee emerge as a consistent player for NU in just his first full year under center? To help him do so, the Huskers will provide a steady ground game behind Roy Helu Jr. and a security blanket tight end with Mike McNeill. Of the six returning starters on defense, one stands out. Defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh will need to dominate the interior and provide opportunities for others. In the last half of 2008, you saw the Blackshirt defense start to reemerge with a sense of urgency and intensity. That trend must continue for NU to contend in 2009.



The Huskers must endure a very stiff test early, when they travel to Blacksburg to take on the Virginia Tech Hokies in week three. Wins in the conference will be tough to earn as well. The North slate opens on a Thursday night at Missouri, and NU must face Kansas and Colorado on the road. The Huskers also must tussle with South contender Oklahoma in November. Can Bo Pelini deliver a division crown in just his second year in charge? The Huskers must show a lot of mental toughness to do so.

Kansas also has momentum coming off of last season. And, unlike Nebraska, they have been consistent over the last several years. The Jayhawks also return several starters and key players from a year ago.

Coach Mark Mangino has nearly remade Kansas football in every way. The Jayhawks have been both tough and fundamentally sound the last four seasons. After a breakthrough 2007 season that included 12 wins, the Jayhawks backed up a little bit. But by winning eight games in 2008 they showed a lot of determination. Like Nebraska, Kansas suffered a tough stretch, losing four of five games at one point midseason. Those losses included drubbings from the Big 12 South's best teams. But they bounced back to stun Missouri in the regular season finale and went on to win their bowl game. That resurrection kept KU on emotional track for making a run at the division title in 2009.

Practically speaking, the Jayhawks have the personnel to make a run. They return quarterback Todd Reesing, who has proven to be the heart and soul of the team. Reesing is joined by playmakers Dezmon Briscoe and Kerry Meier on the outside and experienced running back Jake Sharp. There are some questions about the experience along their offensive line, however. Defensively, Kansas lost some key players in the back seven, but return seven starters.

Like 2008, the schedule may be the thing most likely to thwart the Jayhawks' effort to win the division. Again, they must face both of the South stalwarts, Texas and Oklahoma. They also play Texas Tech in Lubbock. Thankfully for Kansas, the November meeting with Nebraska happens in Lawrence this year. It will still be a rough road, but it's not as daunting as last year's slate.

## HOW THEY STACK UP

Heading into 2009, it's fair to say that four of the six teams in the Big 12 North have a legitimate chance to reign supreme



*Could 2009 be the year that Dan Hawkins's Buffalos finally break through and win the Big 12 North?*

in the plains. Missouri is the defending champion for good reason and they won't go without a fight. With little to lose and a lot to gain, the Buffaloes may stampede from mediocrity to success. An improved Nebraska defense and running game could move the Cornhuskers to the front of the pack. The strength of a returning quarterback and a coach that has consistently moved his program in the right direction might give Kansas the strongest opportunity to win their first-ever division crown.

For Kansas fans to get to "wave the wheat" at the Big 12 title game in San Antonio, the Jayhawks will need to overcome a tough conference schedule. In fact, whichever team in the North eventually captures the division, it's fair to say they can't afford to lose more than just a game or two in conference play—Kansas lost just one game in 2007 and didn't win the division. Or, recognize that when the North's top teams in 2008 (Missouri and Nebraska) both lost three games, the division ended in a tie. For 2009, it is hard to envision every team in the division winning all of their games against South foes. To prevent that second loss in conference, the North division champion will likely have to run the table within the division. That means every intradivision tilt carries the massive implications of tie-breakers and the narrowest differences in the standings. It could be a Great Plains gun fight every single week starting in September. That's just how things go in the great, wide open North. **MSP**

Darren K. Carlson is a writer (and confirmed football junkie) living in Omaha with his wife and their daughter. He writes and edits for *Big Red Network*, a website dedicated to covering Husker football every day.





# RETURN TO PROMINENCE

## The Trip Back to the Top Begins in the North

by *Brandon Vogel*

**T**welve years ago, Nebraska drubbed Oklahoma 69–7 for Tom Osborne’s 250th career victory and the most surprising thing was that nobody was surprised. At the time, Nebraska was the power and Oklahoma was lost.

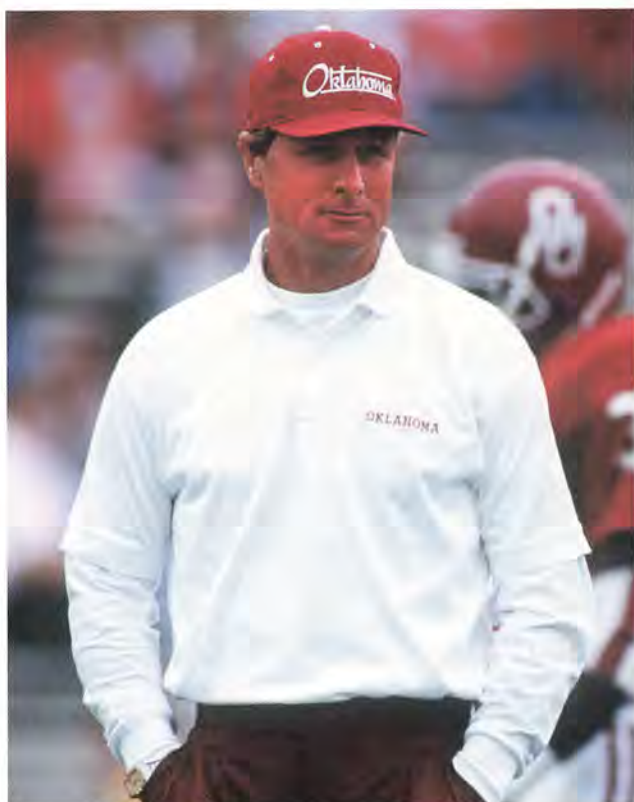
That game was the last of the yearly meetings between the Huskers and Sooners, the last season for Tom Osborne, and the last time Nebraska fans would look at the Sooners with any semblance of pity for a fallen foe. It may have been obscured for an afternoon by the 409 yards Nebraska rolled up on the ground, the seven fumbles the Sooners put on the turf, or the post-game fireworks in honor of Osborne, but one of the great literary themes in life was, if not evident, certainly present on the field. American poet Robert Frost wrote it as “nothing gold can stay,” doom metal band Type O Negative sang it as “everything dies,” and Merle Haggard wished simply that a “Coke was still cola and a joint was a bad place to be.” But, no matter the wording the lesson is the same: Nothing lasts forever. Not even Oklahoma football.

Of course it’s hard to see this through the utter domination of a rival. For so many years the Sooners had broken Cornhusker hearts, which made it hard to take anything other than glee away from stomping on theirs for a few hours on a fall afternoon. Oklahoma had been a king of college football and, like a lot of kingdoms, their empire buckled under the weight of the excesses of its leader Barry Switzer. In 1988, the NCAA placed Oklahoma on three-year probation for numerous rules violations and Switzer resigned. Gary Gibbs, Howard Schnellenberger, and John Blake followed as head coaches at OU, each losing more than his predecessor.

Fast forward to one year ago and the Cornhuskers were down 28–0 to the Sooners less than six minutes into the first quarter. Nobody outside of Nebraska was really surprised.

Oklahoma was an offensive juggernaut every bit the equal of Nebraska’s “Scoring Explosion” offense of 1983 and





*Gary Gibbs—good at keeping the Sooners out of trouble, but not so good at getting them to win.*

in his 10th season at the helm Bob Stoops was cementing Oklahoma as the first truly dominant program in the Big 12. The Sooners raced to 35 points in the first quarter en route to their highest total in the series, crushing Nebraska 62–28. Oklahoma was on their way to their third consecutive Big 12 title, while Nebraska hadn't won the conference since 1999. Here was physical proof of the different paths each program took after the last such lopsided game in 1997. Oklahoma's road led back to the top. Nebraska's had led to somewhere in the middle. But present in that avalanche of points was another, more inspiring, literary theory for Husker fans, the notion of *felix culpa*.

Translated from Latin it means “fortunate fall” and is used to describe how miserable events lead to a better outcome. Schools like USC, Oklahoma, and Texas all had their fortunate falls in or around the '90s and rebounded, but Nebraska's came later. Nebraska's fall brought Bo Pelini back to Lincoln.

While Pelini fumed and screamed in front of a national audience that night in Norman and his Huskers looked light years away from the college football elite, by the end of the 2008 season there were serious signs of progress. Minus the thrashings by Oklahoma and Missouri, Nebraska finished the season strong and that was ultimately the theme of Pelini's first year—momentum. But even a rosy outlook heading into 2009 hasn't changed the question many Husker fans have

been trying to answer for much of this decade: What will it take to return to the top?

Before we can answer that question we need to define the expectations: What is “the top” for Nebraska football?

The easy answer is national titles. Nebraska football fans expect the Huskers to win national titles. However, the more immediate goal falls just a bit short of that. Nebraska football going forward should expect to *compete* for national titles. That's the first benchmark of a successful football program—yearly consistency.

During the '80s, Nebraska spent all of four weeks ranked outside the Associated Press Top 15. They didn't win any national titles that decade, but at the start of every season they were a realistic contender in the race and universally accepted as a true college football power. Before you can complain about not winning the big race—and Nebraska fans eventually got there in the early '90s with Osborne—you have to be in it. That is the primary challenge facing Bo Pelini right now, to get back in the race.

How does he do it? Any prescribed path back to the top is going to be based on opinion—like asking five different people the fastest way to the airport and getting five different answers—but this map runs squarely through the Big 12 North, and the trip for Nebraska starts by owning the division on, and off, the field.



*In the early '80s, Nebraska was a yearly contender by beating their in-conference opponents with players like Turner Gill.*



## RECRUITING

Bill Callahan recruited well but he didn't win with his heavily starred talent and that, combined with Pelini's clear stance on recruiting rankings (he doesn't like them), has led a lot of Nebraska fans to look at the star system used to rate high school prospects with a good bit of disdain. The company line now seems to be, "It doesn't matter how good they are when they come in, it matters how good they are when they leave," and that is 100% true. Unfortunately, it doesn't change the fact that the ceiling is higher when you start with more talent.

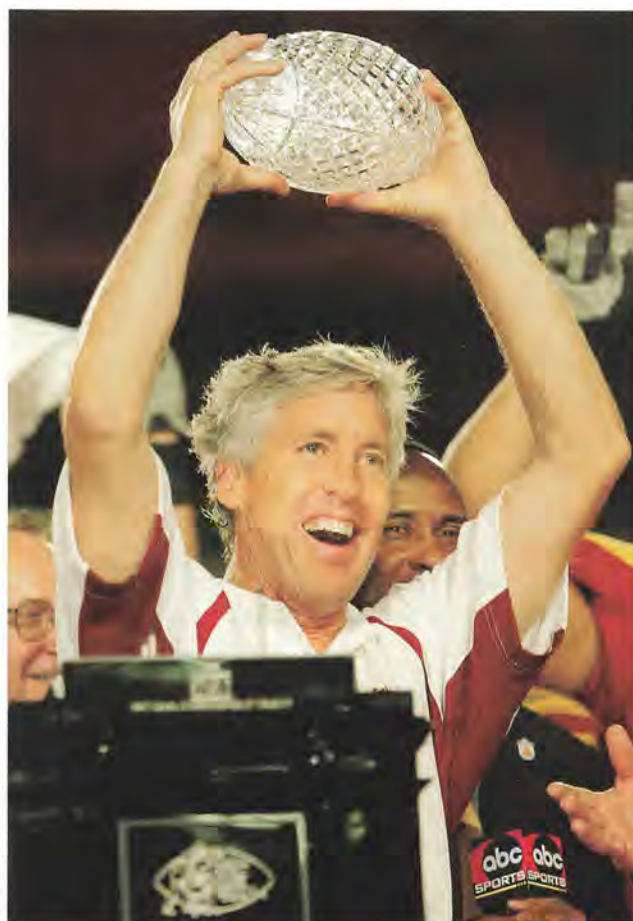
Think of recruiting like grocery shopping. Because we're talking about Nebraska and recruiting is already viewed as a meat market, we'll use beef as our example. You can go to Whole Foods and pick out a dry-aged porterhouse, the \$13-a-pound whole peppercorns, and some flaky sea salt and you're well on your way to cooking an excellent steak. This doesn't guarantee you'll have a great dinner, but your odds are a lot better than if you'd gone to Safeway and bought the week-old meat on special, the generic ground pepper, and a tub of Morton's. A great chef might make a great meal out of anything, but generally speaking the better ingredients you start with the better final product you can produce.

To illustrate, let's look at the seven seasons since Nebraska last played for a national title. The table lists the five winningest BCS programs by winning percentage, followed by the *Rivals.com* class rankings for each season, and the average class rank over seven seasons.

**Rivals.com National Recruiting Class Rankings**

Team	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Avg. Rank	Win % (2002-2008)
USC	13	3	1	1	1	2	8	4.1	.901
Texas	1	15	10	20	5	5	14	10.0	.855
Ohio State	5	41	9	12	12	15	4	14.0	.844
Oklahoma	7	4	8	2	9	14	6	7.1	.821
Georgia	3	6	6	10	4	9	7	6.4	.804

There isn't a perfect correlation between recruiting rankings and winning, but there is a strong one. USC, the top team in terms of winning percentage over the past seven seasons, has the best average class ranking as well. Beyond that, however, variables like conference strength come into play. Oklahoma, on average, has out-recruited Ohio State but has a lower winning percentage because they don't play in the Big Ten. Georgia has out-starred everyone except USC, but, playing in the SEC, has only two conference titles while rivals LSU and Florida have won the last three national titles with a lower average class rank (8.8 and 7.1 respectively). Collectively, the average class rank for the five winningest teams of the past seven seasons was 8.3. Nebraska's average recruiting class ranking over the same span was 25.3.



*USC's Pete Carroll gets the best players in the nation nearly every year. By that token, he should be winning titles.*

What this reveals is not that the top classes win the most games, but the correlation between talent and wins. It isn't perfect by any means but why swim upstream if you don't have to? The past three schools to win national titles—Florida (twice), LSU, and Texas—all averaged recruiting classes in the top ten in the three seasons prior to winning it all. The same goes for four of the top five programs of the past seven seasons. There are certainly exceptions out there—Notre Dame, Florida State, and Miami have all recruited well, with disappointing results of late—but generally the more talent you have the more wins you can expect.

This presents some unique challenges for Nebraska. The Huskers are isolated. They have nowhere near the home state talent base of any of those top five teams, nor the proximity to such a base to seriously challenge teams like Florida and Texas on a yearly basis. That's okay. Nebraska might not need to go that high. A slight bump within the conference might easily have the Huskers playing for a BCS bowl game every year.

Since 2002, Nebraska has averaged about the fifth best recruiting class in the Big 12 (5.3) and the second best class in



the North (2.7), which is precisely where they rank in wins in the Big 12 and the North respectively. The fifth place conference ranking isn't that alarming given their location, but winning the recruiting battle in the North needs to become a yearly thing with the resources at Nebraska's disposal. Do that, and Nebraska will likely have at least the third or fourth best class in the conference, which historically equates to a national class ranking between 15 and 20. While that's not quite the top ten benchmark set by the past national champions or the five winningest programs since 2001, it does mean you're taking talent away from the teams you need to beat the most if you want to play for conference championships. Start winning conference championships and in most years you're going to be a part of the bigger title picture.

Recruiting got a dirty name with Nebraska fans after it didn't equate to wins under Callahan, but talent still matters. Good ingredients, if you know how to use them, generally equal a better product. The advantage for Nebraska is they don't need the best ingredients in the country every year. They need the best ingredients in the North.

## DOMINATE THE DIVISION

Face it, for many years Nebraska got fat on wins playing in the Big Eight. From the time Devaney arrived in Lincoln in 1962 to the time Osborne retired in 1997 the Cornhuskers lost 18 games in 36 seasons to a Big Eight team not named Oklahoma. It wasn't that the Big Eight was a bad conference—Missouri, Colorado, Kansas, Kansas State, and Oklahoma State all finished in the top ten in the final AP poll at least once over that span—but there was always a large gap in resources and continual competitiveness between Oklahoma and Nebraska and everyone else.

That's not the case anymore. Missouri and Kansas have been good of late while Colorado and Kansas State both won conference championships in the early oughts. Still, by any objective measure you're left with three traditional megapowers in the Big 12: Texas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska.

The traditional power argument always comes across as condescending until you consider how rare it is that a team from outside the established hierarchy actually wins a national title. "Modern college football" is generally considered to

## 1995: A CASE STUDY IN REGIONAL DOMINANCE

While Oklahoma was usually the foe standing between Nebraska and Big Eight and national supremacy, the Husker history books are peppered with highly-ranked match-ups against Kansas, Colorado, Missouri, and Kansas State. However, no Nebraska team had to do more to defend their turf from Big Eight neighbors than the best team in Nebraska history: the 1995 squad.

The Cornhuskers opened the season as the second-ranked team in the AP poll. Oklahoma was the consensus pick for second in the conference, but it would be the Wildcats, Buffaloes, and Jayhawks that would emerge as the cream of the conference crop behind Nebraska. Those schools had the misfortune of fielding some of their best teams of the decade in the same year and conference as one of the best teams of all time.

Nebraska had outscored their previous six opponents 332–87 prior to facing #8 Kansas State in Lincoln on October 21. However, none of those teams had been ranked. The Wildcats seemed like the first real threat to end Nebraska's 18-game conference winning streak, but it would take 19 fourth-quarter points to make the game look respectable after the Huskers had built a 42–6 lead.

One week later, the Huskers traveled to Boulder to face #7 Colorado. The Buffs had vaulted as high as fourth in the AP poll after beating preseason #3 Texas A&M. Even without starting quarterback Koy Detmer, Colorado figured to be a stiff challenge on the road, but Nebraska played flawless football. Committing no turnovers or penalties on the afternoon, the Huskers never trailed in the 44–21 victory.

Nebraska's final test of the regular season came against the surprising Jayhawks who had climbed to sixth in the polls on the strength of road victories over Colorado and Oklahoma. By the time the Huskers visited, the Jayhawks were ranked 10th in the country, marking the first meeting of the conference foes as top ten teams since 1968. Kansas won that game but had lost 26 straight to the Huskers since, and the streak was to continue in 1995. Glen Mason's squad kept Nebraska in check for much of the first half but still trailed 14–3 at the break. The Huskers scored touchdowns on three of their first four possessions of the second half on their way to yet another rout, 41–3.

Three top ten teams, three blowouts—tangible proof of the distance Nebraska had put between itself and its closest competitors. Kansas State, Colorado, and Kansas all went on to win their bowl games and finish the season ranked in the top ten, but none of them could come within three touchdowns of Nebraska. The '95 season was the last for the Big Eight and arguably its best since Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Colorado had finished one, two, and three in 1971.

That '71 team was considered one of college football's greatest as well. Is it just a coincidence, or does regional dominance mean something? The fact that Nebraska's two greatest teams came out of two of the greatest years for the Big Eight makes the answer pretty clear: When your best is able to withstand some of your conference's best, the national recognition tends to take care of itself.



be the period since the Associated Press started continually publishing their poll in 1936, and that provides a pretty clean cutoff from the Ivy League-East Coast domination of football's early years. Since 1936, 84 national champions have been recognized by a national poll (AP, UPI, Coaches', or BCS) and 58% (49 championships) of those have been claimed by the 10 teams with the most wins between 1936 and 2008. Expand the list by just five more teams and that percentage jumps to 73% (62 championships). While it seems haughty—and dangerous—to assume that programs with a history of winning will continue to win, that's more or less the reality. Nearly three-fourths of all the titles won since 1936 have come from 15 schools, and only one of those schools plays in the Big 12 North.

The fact that Nebraska became one of the winningest programs in college football by beating Missouri, Kansas, Kansas State, Colorado, and Iowa State, then playing off against Oklahoma for a trip to the Orange Bowl year after year is encouraging. They can continue to be one of winningest programs in college football by doing the same thing. That situation exists today in the division format. The North contains six of the original Big Eight teams and if the Cornhuskers get back to beating them consistently, they're in a one-game playoff for a BCS bowl berth every year. That is one of the more enviable positions in all of college football.

Even with scholarship limits closing the talent gap across the board in college football, dominating the division isn't an unrealistic expectation given the resources in Lincoln. Nebraska is still the kingpin of the North in terms of funding, facilities, and expectations.

But, the Callahan era proved that those things alone aren't enough to win football games. First and foremost, you need a leader who is able to recognize and utilize those advantages. Nebraska didn't fall from the upper ranks of college football due to any seismic shift in the foundation of the game. Nebraska fell for the same reason most great programs fall: A coach who couldn't win like the guys before him won. It happens. The best programs, spurred by a tradition of winning and the expectations that tradition fosters, eventually find their guy and pull through it. History, and the big bucks of money that come with it, almost demand it.



*National titles are an expectation at Nebraska, but to get there they first have to contend on a consistent basis.*

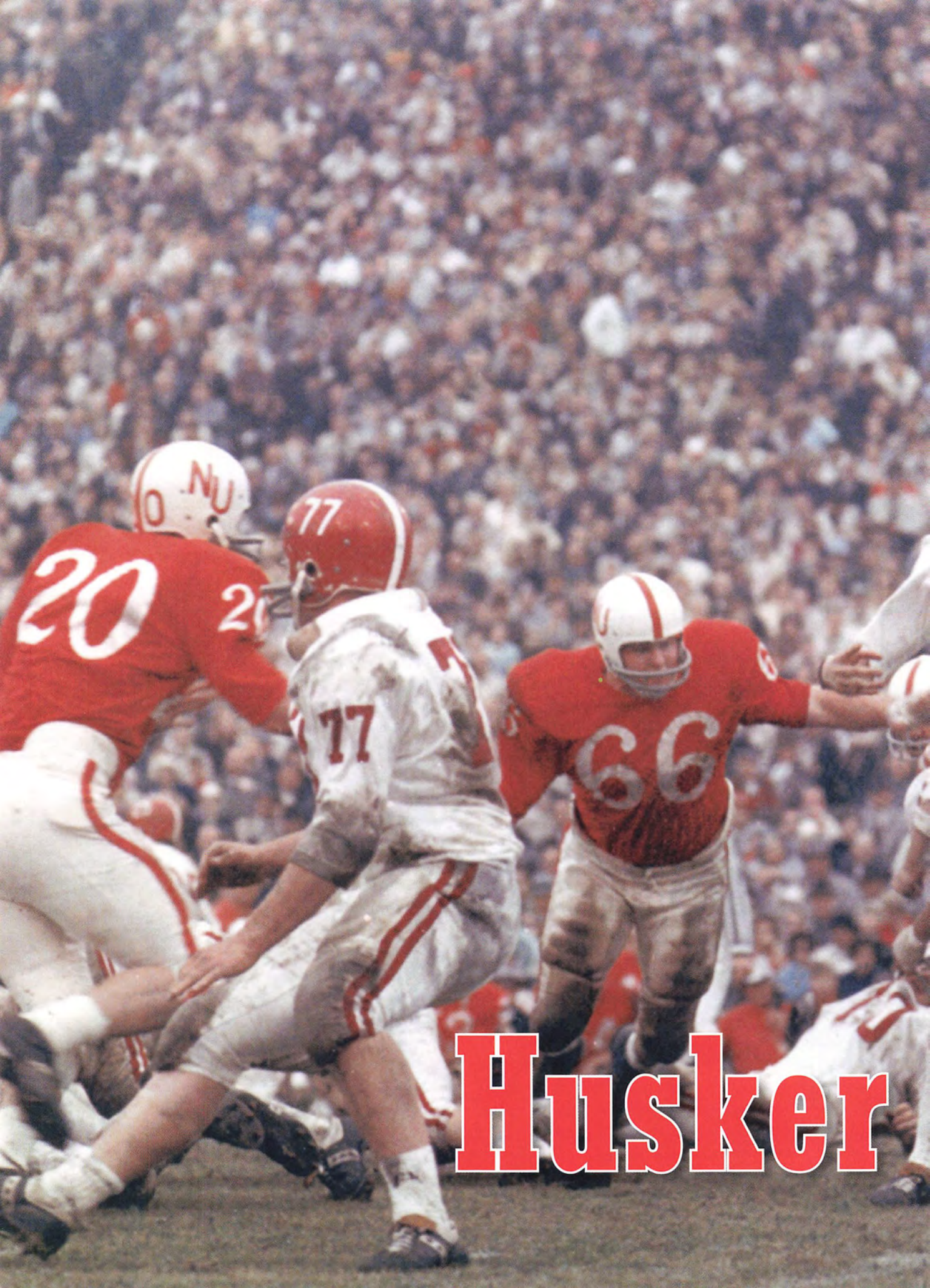
Is Bo Pelini that guy? It's too early to tell with any certainty, but a lot of people, Tom Osborne included, feel that way. Pelini took a team that was a consensus pick to finish fourth in the North and guided them to a share of the division title with an ad hoc linebacking corps, a simplified defensive system, and unfamiliarity at every turn. Most would say that Pelini wasn't in a position to use the advantages inherent to the Nebraska job last year. That should change going forward.

Eventually, if everything goes according to plan, it won't be enough for Nebraska to simply dominate the North, limp into the Big 12 title game every year with three losses, and be viewed as a notch behind the big money and talent in the South. But in year two of the Pelini era, that destination is on a bigger map.

For now, Nebraska starts locally. The biggest game of the upcoming Husker season isn't against Oklahoma or Virginia Tech, it's against Kansas. The fiercest recruiting battles won't be fought in California or Florida, but Missouri and Texas. The beauty of college football has always been that it's a regional game played for a national crown. Before you can play for the latter you have to win a bunch of the former. The college football landscape may look a little different now, but success in the future is still as simple as that. **MSP**

Brandon Vogel lives in Boston, MA and currently writes for *BigRedNetwork.com*. His work has also appeared on *FOXSports.com*, *MSN.com*, and in *Everywhere* magazine.





**Husker**





# BOB VS. THE BEAR

## A History of Hubris, Hats, and Hymns

by Brandon Vogel

**T**he day after Bob Devaney died in May of 1997, the first sentence of his obituary in *The New York Times* read like this:

*Bob Devaney, a raconteur and humorist whose coaching made the University of Nebraska a national football power and whose leadership as athletic director modernized the athletics program, died yesterday at the Eastmont Towers, a retirement home in Lincoln, Neb. He was 82.*

Note carefully the word order there. It's "raconteur and humorist *whose* coaching" and not simply "coach," almost as if Nebraska, when it hired Devaney away from Wyoming in 1962, had happened upon its own version of Bob Hope who, I'll be damned, could coach football too.

Such is the curse of Devaney, football coach *and* funny man. Even among his constituents, the generations of Nebraska fans who have kept every game at Memorial Stadium sold-out since his seventh game as head coach, Devaney is still viewed as a man who was as quick with a quip as he was with a perfectly timed play-action pass call. It's not surprising, really, when you consider that he not only fit the archetype of the ruddy-faced, life-of-the-party Irishman so perfectly, he seemed to revel in it.

Yet once you start to wade through the one-liners and Bushmills that top the collective glass of Devaney memories, you will find that the man who laid the foundation for the successful, mega-power Nebraska football program you see today was one of the best coaches of his generation. Just look at who he had to beat to get to the top.

Between 1962 and 1972 the NCAA lists seven coaches on its website other than Devaney as having won consensus national titles: John McKay,

# History



Darrell Royal, Frank Broyles, Ara Parseghian, Duffy Daugherty (Devaney's mentor at Michigan State), Woody Hayes, and Bear Bryant. Collectively, that group, all of them Hall of Famers, won more than 1,400 games—compiling a winning percentage of .740—and their careers all overlapped with the 11 years Devaney was at Nebraska. And of that who's who list of coaches from the '60s and '70s none of them won more games, at a higher rate from 1962–1972 than Devaney.

Over the course of his career, Devaney would square off against four of those seven coaches. In Nebraska's first Cotton Bowl appearance following the '64 season, the Huskers lost narrowly to Broyles' Arkansas squad 10–7. In 1969 and 1970, Devaney faced McKay, losing the '69 game at home before tying the Trojans in Los Angeles the following year on his way to his first national championship. Devaney's swan song came in the 1973 Orange Bowl where his final Huskers team dismantled Parseghian's Irish 40–6.

But none of those games, as notable as they were, may have meant as much to the formation of what Nebraska football was to become as the three times Bob met the Bear. When Nebraska was playing for its first national title in 1966, the Bear was there. When the Huskers first learned that speed kills, a painful lesson Tom Osborne learned anew in the early '90s, the Bear was there. When Nebraska won its second consecutive national title, staking a claim as the greatest football team in history for a school that a decade earlier had finished one step from the cellar in the conference, the Bear was there.

Perhaps no one outside the Big Eight got a better glimpse of the early growth of the modern Nebraska football program than Paul “Bear” Bryant. It's a story that, like all good stories, unfolds in three acts.

## ACT 1—HUBRIS

*“I don't expect to win enough games to be put on probation. I just want to win enough games to warrant an investigation.”*

—Bob Devaney upon accepting the NU job

The notion that Nebraska could be a modern-day football powerhouse could have been considered laughable in 1962. There was a history of success at Nebraska pre-World War II. But in the years since, Nebraska had hardly looked like a burgeoning football powerhouse, with a good 25-year history of mostly sub-.500 records, a small recruiting base, and no real proximity to major media or population centers. To Devaney it must have looked a lot like Wyoming, and he was already making inroads there, winning 35 of 45 games over his first four seasons. Why do the dirty work again?

To one very important Devaney advisor, the Huskers looked like a sleeping giant. Michigan State coach Duffy Daugherty, along with Nebraska chancellor Clifford Hardin—himself a Michigan State man—had seen the support Bill Jennings had even while losing 70% of his games, and they were convinced a better opportunity for Bob was just across the state line. They just had to convince Devaney. Writing in his 1981 autobiography, *Devaney*, Devaney recalled that Duffy, the man who had helped the young coach land an assistant's job with the Spartans, eventually swayed Devaney by telling him, “If [he] won here as [he] had been able to win at Wyoming things could go big.”

And go big they did. Quickly. In Devaney's first season at Nebraska the Huskers won nine games and beat Miami in the Gotham Bowl for the first bowl victory in school history. The next year they won 10 games and beat Auburn in the Orange Bowl, climbing into the AP's final top-ten ranking for the first time since 1940.

The first sign that Nebraska might not just be improved but ready to challenge for national titles came in that 1965 Cotton Bowl where the Cornhuskers lost narrowly, 10–7, to the eventual co-national champion Razorbacks. The first time Nebraska played for the national title, however, came against the Bear one year later.

Coming off that impressive Cotton Bowl, Devaney and the Huskers opened 1965 as the top-ranked team in the pre-season AP poll. Despite going 10–0, they'd never return to the top spot the rest of the season. Voters were



*Alabama used speed to beat the Huskers in early contests.*





*Nebraska came into the games the bigger team, but it was Alabama's speed that won the early match ups.*

fickle in those days, reshuffling the deck any time a team collected a big win. Nebraska, as a newcomer among the college football elite, had more to prove and lacked the wins over top-ten teams that eventually pushed unbeaten Arkansas and Michigan State to the top. Heading into the bowls, undefeated Nebraska was ranked third and slated to play 8–1–1 Alabama in the Orange Bowl.

To win the title, Nebraska needed help on New Year's Day 1966 and, up until kickoff, got it. LSU upended Arkansas early in the day at the Cotton Bowl, and as the Orange Bowl was kicking off, UCLA was engineering an historic 14–12 upset of Michigan State in the Rose Bowl. The national title was there for the taking in Miami. All Devaney had to do was take down the Bear, winner of two titles already that decade and the most iconic coach since Knute Rockne.

On paper, Nebraska had the advantage. After losing the first game of the season, the Tide had clawed their way back into the top-ten by late October but faced a much bigger team in Nebraska. "When they ran out there you could see the field tilt," one pro scout said, according to *Time* magazine. Nebraska's All-America defensive tackle Walt Barnes outweighed Alabama's All-America center Paul Crane by 45 pounds and that was only slightly higher than the average difference across the front lines. Alabama was not a bunch of big earth movers, and that only made for an even better match-up—brawn versus speed, the young hotshot coach taking on the established legend, a true made for TV event—and the

Bear would use the occasion to write his own happy ending.

Make no mistake, Nebraska was the juggernaut coming into this game. The Huskers had the top rushing game in the country, the second best total offense, the second best scoring offense, and a defense that had ranked eighth in the country and only allowed nine points a game. The Tide had a knack for not giving up points either, allowing only 7.9 per game, but little else that would jump out at you on paper.

Described as "cobra-quick" coming in to the game, Alabama won the Orange Bowl by squeezing

the life out of the game like a python. After Nebraska fumbled in Tide territory on its first possession, Bryant orchestrated an elaborate game of keep away behind the passing of Steve Sloan, a maddeningly successful series of tackle-eligible receptions, and three onside kicks. Nebraska was equally able to move the ball when they had it, but the Cornhuskers simply didn't have it enough. At the end of the 39–28 loss the statistics would show that Alabama had run 86 plays to Nebraska's 43. Devaney, the eternal jokester, was somberly left to consider this reality in *Devaney* after his first meeting with the Bear: "We lost to Alabama because I was outcoached."



*Bob Devaney is known for his humor rather than his great coaching, even though he was the man who put Nebraska on the road to college football greatness.*





*Devaney admitted he was outcoached in the 39-28 loss to Alabama in the 1966 Orange Bowl.*

Nebraska started that season in a place they had never been before: atop the polls. The Bear knew what it took to finish there.

## ACT 2-HATS

*"I know you fellows are behind the football program, win or draw."*

— Devaney speaking to the Omaha Business Men's

Association, *Go Big Red: The Story of Cornhusker Football*

The surprise when the August 15, 1966 issue of *Sports*

*Illustrated* hit newsstands was not that the cover featured Bear Bryant or that the issue featured a piece called "I'll Tell You About Football" authored by Bryant—the first of an epic, five-part series written with John Underwood. With three national titles in the first half of the decade Bear merited the coverage.

No, the surprise was that on the cover the Bear was missing his signature brown fedora, a hat he had found left at his house in Kentucky following a victory party, according to *Go Big Red*. In its place was the now infamous houndstooth hat. Opinions differ as to the hat's origins—some say Oakland A's owner Charley Finley gave it to him, others give the credit to Sonny Werblin, owner of the New York Jets—but if the sideline look had changed, the on-field product was much the same: small, fast, and powerful.

The Crimson Tide opened 1966 at the top of the AP pre-season poll and *SI*'s Dan Jenkins had stated simply in its preview issue, "This season will be Alabama's again." It wasn't Alabama's season again but it probably should've been.

Chasing its third straight national title, the Tide rolled through the SEC, shutting out the last four teams on the schedule to finish the regular season 10-0, but still sat third in the final AP poll behind Michigan State and Notre Dame who had played to a 10-10 tie two weeks earlier in what was then billed as the "Game of the Century." With Notre Dame abstaining from bowl games at the time, Michigan State exempt from the Rose Bowl thanks to an arcane "no-repeat" rule in the Big Ten, and a whole heap of controversy left to be sorted out, the voters closed up shop and got the hell out of dodge, declaring the December 5 poll the final one of the season.

But undefeated Alabama still had another game to play, against 9-1, #6 Nebraska in the 1967 Sugar Bowl. It could have served as a second de facto

national championship game if Nebraska hadn't slipped up in its final game of the season against Oklahoma. Instead, the Huskers were faced with traveling down to New Orleans to face a roiling Crimson Tide.

Devaney arrived in New Orleans sporting a new fashion statement of his own. Perhaps inspired by the Bear—within months of that *SI* cover, full page ads for houndstooth hats had found their way into the magazine—Devaney was photographed by an AP journalist just off the plane in New Orleans with a camera to his eye, a devilish smirk on his face, and a rakish red fedora on his head as he snapped a shot of the Sugar Bowl Queen.

Forty years later I would buy the same style hat—with a faux feather and three hideous white ropes in place of a hatband, listed as a "Devaney hat"—off *eBay* from a seller in Seward. It never became the signature look of Devaney but the difference in perception between the Bear and Bob in 1966 was plenty evident atop their heads.

Houndstooth, while loud, is at least a traditional men's fashion print. A red hat? In typical Devaney fashion it almost seemed like a joke. At a press conference prior to the game the two coaches exchanged hats for a photo op. It was likely the only sign of equality between Alabama and Nebraska that year. Since their Orange Bowl meeting the year before, the Tide had gotten better. Nebraska had not.

Alabama brought an even better defense into the bowl game this time around, allowing a paltry 3.7 points per game.



Nebraska scored a touchdown against the Tide, something only four other teams could claim that season, but by the time Dick Davis found the end zone in the fourth quarter, the win had long been salted away. Kenny Stabler and Ray Perkins hooked up for a 45-yard completion on the first play of the game and they never stopped connecting as Perkins racked up 178 yards receiving on the day, and the Tide emphatically rolled. With the court of public opinion and columnists' inches the only forum Bryant had left, Alabama crushed Nebraska 34-7. The loss earned the Cornhuskers the dubious distinction of being only the second team, Alabama the other, to fall in the Cotton, Orange, Sugar, and Rose Bowls, then the four major bowl games. In the locker room, a humbled Devaney again gave the rare humorless quote, according to *The Last Coach*: "Alabama is the best football team I've ever seen." Unfortunately for the Tide, his vote was the only one left to be had.

The Sugar Bowl confirmed a lot of what college football fans learned the year before. The old guard, in his dapper hat, remained the gold standard while Devaney, in his garish hat, remained good but not quite good enough. Nebraska was still stuck on the doorstep of college football's elite. Devaney had earned the right to knock, but nobody was letting him in.

### ACT 3—HYMNS

*Reporter: "Is it true that you have gone so far as to sing hymns with a mother to get her boy to go to Nebraska?"*

*Devaney: "Yes, I did that. The mother came to Nebraska and the boy enrolled at Missouri."*

—*Sports Illustrated*

It would be five years before Nebraska and Alabama met again. After both programs had slipped a bit from their early '60s heights—Nebraska went 6-4 in both 1967 and 1968, Alabama 6-5 and 6-5-1 in 1969 and 1970—Bryant called Bob to arrange a Liberty Bowl match-up in 1969. "Why don't we get together and have some more fun?" Bear asked, according to *I Remember Paul "Bear" Bryant*. Devaney said sure, hung up, and immediately called the Sun Bowl selection committee to set up a game against Georgia.

By 1971, however, Bob was ready to tackle the Bear again. After winning the first national title in school history the previous season, he was also privately plotting his exit, citing—in a chapter of his autobiography plainly titled "The pressure of recruiting was one of the reasons I quit coaching"—the pressure of recruiting.

Devaney's ebullient nature lent itself well to the recruiting trail. The most famous story involves the wooing of Tony Jeter, where Devaney sang "Bringing in the Sheaves" with Jeter's mother and secured both the commitment and a go-to story for reporters seeking to embody the coach's good

humor. The song itself is a classic hymn that has a built-in appeal for Nebraskans. Its universal themes of sowing and reaping would have certainly sounded familiar on the farm and rank "Bringing in the Sheaves" as the only song to be hummed in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, sung in *Little House on the Prairie*, and used to lure a kid to Lincoln to play football.

But chasing young men takes its toll on old men, even light-hearted ones like Devaney. The coach had spent years on the recruiting trail, as the song goes, sowing seeds of kindness in the morning, noontide, and dewy eve. By 1971, Devaney was tired but his team was poised for one more bountiful harvest.

The Bear, no fan himself of recruiting late in his career, had his own favorite hymn. He sang "Love Lifted Me" on the morning of the first infamous Junction Boys practice at Texas A&M and sang it on his way to his retirement press conference in 1982. Perhaps contrary to the hymn's theme of redemption, Alabama offensive lineman Jerry Duncan recalled in *The Last Coach* that hearing the song generally meant "somebody's ass was going to wind up in a sling." It would have been appropriate, then, to hear the Bear singing it as he exited the Orange Bowl in 1972.

That penultimate 1971 season for Devaney could be viewed as the culmination of the rebuilding project the coach



*Paul "Bear" Bryant won the early battles, but in the end Bob Devaney got the best of him. Bryant's 38-6 loss to the Huskers in the '72 Orange Bowl was the worst of his career at the time.*





*Nebraska's Jerry Tagge quarterbacked the team to a win over Alabama in the '72 Orange Bowl, winning the '71 national title.*

undertook in 1962. Prior to the new "Game of the Century" against Oklahoma in November of that year, no team had played Nebraska closer than 24 points. No team after that would either. This, finally, looked like the perfect Big Red Machine. All that stood in the way was, once more, the Bear.

Alabama in 1971 had experienced a rebirth of sorts, getting to the Orange Bowl undefeated after disappointing seasons the two previous years. If the previous two bowl match-ups had looked lopsided on paper, this game looked like a clash of the titans. Both the Huskers and the Tide ranked in the top ten in rushing defense, scoring defense, total defense, and scoring offense. Nebraska had the electric Johnny Rodgers. Alabama countered with running back Johnny Musso, the original "Italian Stallion." The game marked only the third time teams ranked #1 and #2 had met in the postseason, a true college Super Bowl, but it was never as close as the polls indicated.

The Huskers opened the game needing just five plays to score their first touchdown and closed it with one of Rodgers' trademark punt returns for a 14-0 lead. Alabama fumbled the ensuing kickoff and Nebraska marched 27 yards to make it 21-0 less than three minutes into the second quarter. Four minutes later it was 28-0 and, effectively, game over. Nebraska coasted through the second half on the way to handing the Bear what was then the worst loss of his career, 38-6.

This time, having witnessed firsthand Nebraska's rise from challenger to dominant defending champion, it was

Bryant's turn to heap praise during the postgame, saying, "They might have been the greatest I've ever seen," according to *SI*. "Might have" qualifies as effusive praise from a college coach whose career spanned four decades. It also illustrates a key difference between the man many view as the greatest college coach ever and the man many view as one of the greatest guys to have a drink with ever.

The Bear saw a lot of teams in his 37 seasons. Devaney saw far fewer, and that's part of the reason his accomplishments are hidden behind his jubilant off-field presence. He didn't get his start in the college game until he was 37 years old and he was out before he was 60. "If I had gotten started in college coaching as early as Bear Bryant," he said in *Devaney*, "I might have stayed on in coaching a little longer."

Bryant did stay on, winning three more national titles while chasing down Amos Alonzo Stagg's record for career coaching victories over the next decade. "Quit coaching? I'd croak in a week," Bryant told John Underwood of *SI* late in his career, and he was nearly right. The Bear coached his final game December 29, 1982 in the Liberty Bowl, beating Illinois 21-15. It took a little more than a month, not a week, but he would soon be dead, providing a sad and romantic culmination to a legendary career: A man who not only lived to coach, but knew it.

Bryant's death was a front page story in the New York papers. Devaney's obituary showed up on page 20 of the *Times* with everyone else's. The only shame in that was that the coach wasn't around to comment on the discrepancy, but maybe it was better that way. Devaney inevitably would've had one last great line to add to the list, which would've only bolstered the view of him as a humorist who happened to coach a little bit of football.

Devaney was a funny guy and that made him imminently memorable. So memorable, in fact, that his football accomplishments almost always seem secondary. But for those of us who watch Nebraska football today, the proof is right there, not in the championship trophies or gleaming facilities, but in the seats.

Memorial Stadium grew from 34,000 seats to 72,700 under Devaney, all of them filled since November 3, 1962. Was that growth due to the winning wit of the coach or just the winning?

Of course it was the winning. Not even Devaney had enough good jokes to fill a stadium, but, "humorist" that he was, he would've given it a hell of a shot. **MSP**

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Brandon Vogel lives in Boston, MA and currently writes for *BigRedNetwork.com*. His work has also appeared on *FOXSports.com*, *MSN.com*, and in *Everywhere* magazine.





# "THUNDER" THORNTON

## A Player and Person That Helped Define Nebraska Football

by David Max

**A**s a 50-something-year-old Husker fan that grew up in small town Page, Nebraska, my first memories of Nebraska football started when the Bob Devaney era began in 1962. I was 11 at the time and remember listening to Lyell Bremser call the games on the radio. They had great nicknames for some of the players, like they do today, and some of the earliest were Charlie "Choo-Choo" Winters, Bob "Boomer" Brown, and Bill "Thunder" Thornton.

I had the opportunity to interview Bill for *HuskerPedia* in 2004 prior to a fundraising event. The event organizer came up with the idea of getting replica copies of the November 3, 1962 game program against Missouri signed by former players who were on the team at the time. He selected quarterback Dennis Claridge and Bill. The 1962 Missouri game started the record sellout streak. Bill and I never met in person as the interview was conducted over

the phone. Nevertheless, I could tell I was talking to a very special individual. His signature on those programs helped raise a few thousand dollars for that fundraiser. Most recently they have been auctioned off after every new home game sellout with the proceeds going to the Nebraska Athletic Department.

Bill was a native of Toledo, Ohio and was a Bill Jennings recruit along with several others from the state. Former Athletic Director Tippy Dye was from Toledo and was part of Bill's recruiting connection. As a sophomore, Thornton scored a touchdown in Nebraska's 17-14 upset win at Oklahoma. As a junior, he was a first-team All-Big Eight running back on a team that won only three games.

Thornton was an integral part of Bob Devaney's first team and contributed heavily in two of Coach Devaney's signature wins during his first season as coach. Thornton became



the first African American captain in Nebraska football history. At that time players played both ways, so Bill was a linebacker and a fullback. He scored twice in the victory over Michigan despite playing with a shoulder dislocation. He scored twice in the Gotham Bowl win over Miami which was Nebraska's first bowl victory. His two-point conversion after Nebraska's last touchdown was the margin of victory in the 36–34 win.

While at Nebraska, Thornton was the first African American member in the University of Nebraska's Innocents Society, a prestigious club whose members are known for their academic prowess and leadership abilities. His quarterback on the 1962 team, Dennis Claridge, is quoted as saying: "He had a great personality. Just an awesome personality. His being in the Innocents Society, that shows how highly he was thought of." Claridge went on to say: "Thunder was the best college football player I ever played with. What a talent! He outplayed Ernie Davis when Syracuse came to Lincoln in 1961." (Editor's note: Ernie Davis was the first African American Heisman Trophy winner, in 1961, and was the subject of the recent movie *The Express*.)

Thornton went on to play six years for the St. Louis Cardinals and returned to Lincoln as a graduate assistant in 1969. He was an assistant coach at Missouri under Warren Powers. His later years were spent in Columbia, MO. He passed away on December 18, 2008 from complications of diabetes.

After he passed away I posted a request for comments on *HuskerPedia* from people that remembered Thornton and his accomplishments. I received several. Here is a representative one:



**Thunder Thornton was a member of Bob Devaney's first team and was well respected by Devaney and his teammates.**

*My name is Jim Stiver. I am 56 years young and now live in Northern Lower Michigan. I used to live in Lincoln, NE when I was very young. I graduated from Norfolk High, Norfolk, NE in 1970.*

*My son and I are die-hard Big Red fans and we even venture to a game or two every year in Lincoln to see our beloved Huskers play. A couple of years ago I was showing my son around Lincoln and I showed him where I went to grade school (Elliot Grammar School). I told him there was a pretty large community swimming pool just west of the school that I swam at quite frequently.*

*One day when I was swimming there (I can't remember the year it was in the 1960s) a really big, strong looking man was watching us try to throw each other up in the air so we could do flips and what-not back into the water. We weren't doing so good and this gentleman came over to us and asked if we would like it if he would throw us up in the air. We all immediately yelled "yeah!" cause we knew that this guy being like a strong giant to all of us knew he could really throw our skinny little butts way up into the air. After he started we were just having the time of our lives and I am telling you the guy just kept doing it. It seemed like he did it all day and he was getting as much fun from it as we were. I thought to myself, what a great person this is to take the time and make a few snot-nose kids have a great time.*

*I finally swam over to him and asked his name and he said, "My name is Bill 'Thunder' Thornton and I play for the Cornhuskers." I will never forget that day and I am sure if you would have asked him about it he probably would have said that he did that all the time. I never ever got to see him again but I never ever forgot that day either. It was kind of ironic that my son informed me of his passing. The world has lost someone who was a real angel and I have no doubt that he is with God now. Thank you, Bill, for making a little boy one of the happiest kids in the world and for taking time with us and making sure that we all had fun and felt important. You will always be my hero. Rest in peace.*

One of Bill's high school teammates, Ken Najarian, had this to say:

*The last half of my sophomore year, the returning football players were working out together and I got closer to Bill and observed him preparing himself for football and track. To watch him push himself to get one more rep on the bench or curl was amazing. Veins sticking out in his neck and forearms and blowing to get that one more rep than he got the day before. Always giving maximum*





**Guard Bob Brown opened a few holes for Thunder in his day**

*effort to make himself better. Leadership with him was not about a lot of talk—some when needed—but, mostly by doing.*

*After Bill graduated from Nebraska, another teammate of ours, Ron Curtis, was at a coaching clinic and Coach Devaney was the main speaker. After it was over Ron waited and asked the coach about Bill. Ron said the coach stepped away from everyone and tapped Ron on the chest and said, "Sight unseen, if you have a player of Bill's ability and his make-up as a human being, I'll give him a scholarship." Devaney went on to tell Ron that as good as Bill was on the football field, he was a better human being and had done more to foster good relations in the community than anyone he had had previously! Bill only played for Devaney during his senior year at Nebraska.*

*Here's the long and short of this. Bill "Thunder" Thornton was a person you had to admire because of his drive that took his athletic ability and allowed him to achieve at the highest level from humble beginnings. If you were fortunate enough to know him, you found him to be not only a suburb athlete, but also, a tremendous human being!*

*We are better people from having Bill touch our lives!*

Below are some of the recollections that Bill shared about his playing days at Nebraska during that 2004 interview:

**Regarding Bob Brown**—I remember how he dominated the offense out there on the football field. You could always count on him to open up a hole. He went on to do great things as a pro player as well. He was quite a player. He asked me to

redshirt because of my injury prior to the Michigan game my senior year. He was saying, "If you redshirt I guarantee you that you will be an All-American and we'll win the National Championship". I said, "Oh, Bob," because Tyrone and I and another guy came to Nebraska from Ohio at the same time and we figured we would all leave at the same time. Was that a mistake not to redshirt because they had the old AFL and the NFL and they just broke apart and the bidding was high and that was quite a vision that Bob Brown had.

**His favorite Bob Devaney story**—It wasn't funny but I recall his disappointment about not having enough funds to travel to New York to play in the Gotham Bowl. There was a big question about it and he came to the team and told us that we're going if we have to drive our own cars. That was the first bowl game that we had been invited to and he had used that as a motivational tool during the season. He was bound and determined to do it. Then he walks in and tells the team that he had worked it out and we were going and everybody loved him.

**His memory of the Gotham Bowl game**—The Gotham Bowl game was cold and it was not very well attended. If I remember correctly the taxi drivers were on strike. You could shoot a shotgun in the stands and wouldn't hit a soul. It was an empty stadium and it was a terrible, terrible day. It was sleet and snow and everything else and we went out and just wanted to play. At that time we had a kid by the name of Willie Ross and he made his mark in that game. It was a miserable day but it all warmed up because we did win. It was an all around good trip and was the beginning of things to come.

**Regarding the Miami players**—They were very confident. I don't want to say cocky but they were very confident. They got a lot of publicity prior to the game and we read about them and the great things that they were going to do and how George Mira was going to wreak havoc on this Nebraska team from Podunk City. Things changed when we got on the battlefield and it was a hell of a game.

**His memory of being a Nebraska assistant coach**—That was a good experience. When I got back to Lincoln, Bob was still at the helm and things were moving rapidly. I was just amazed at the changes that were taking place with guys like Warren Powers and Monte Kiffin. Those guys I had played with and known so they took me in and showed me what was going on. It was a great experience, a wonderful experience and opportunity.

I remember going on a recruiting trip with Tom Osborne when we recruited David Humm. We went to David's house in Nevada and visited his parents. I think his father was running a casino. That was my first encounter with David. When he came to the university eyes started popping because he could throw that ball. I mean he could throw a rope. He was a very likable person. His family was great. His dad was great.





*Photo from the program guide to the November 3, 1962 Homecoming game against Missouri that started the sell-out streak. Thornton was there when Nebraska started its reign of success.*

Really, really nice people. I have a lot of respect for that kid. He had a lot of guts. He could take a hit.

The thing about Devaney's philosophy was get yourself organized, put it out there and do it as short as possible and get out of there. He didn't like long drawn out meetings. That made guys, particularly coordinators, very sensitive as to how they wanted to do things. He was interested in details and how we were going to teach it. He would put himself in that player's position and he would sit down with you and spend time with you. It was amazing how much better you felt going out and teaching techniques or a system. He was involved a lot and he was popular and the time he spent with the staff had to be divided up with his public obligations. Then Tom came in and he extended some things, especially offensively.

#### **His memory on starting the sellout streak in 1962—**

It really feels good to be a part of it but it goes without saying that we didn't know that it was going to happen. Just the idea of committing yourself and believing what the coaches were telling you and seeing his [Devaney's] desire to do a great job and instilling the confidence in each of us that we could do it. Then offering a challenge to go beyond that. That's part of Devaney's legacy is the ability to talk to individual players and a group, to get players to play above and beyond their ability. He was great at that. Those are the things that stand out and doing so served to set a standard for the incoming players and once that's set the players understand it and they commit to it

then success is bound to happen.

**How he got his nickname—**I picked up the name my senior year in high school. It was thrown around a little bit. When I got to Nebraska with the Jennings regime we were playing both ways and I was playing linebacker and fullback. Everybody wanted me to play defense because I tackled fairly well. One practice one of the freshman coaches made the comment that I hit like thunder and it stuck.

**His last comment from that 2004 interview—**I'm retired. I worked for the state [of Missouri] for 16 years.

Now I'm trying to readjust. I lost my wife four years ago and ever since then I've been learning a new profession of housekeeping and organization. [Laughs] I'm not doing a very good job of it. I'm going to get back out and get busy again. It's difficult making the adjustment having been married for 40-something years and then being alone. I may get back into doing some scouting. I can't see myself sitting on a fishing bank although I like that a lot. I see myself getting back into doing something that I like to do and would be of benefit to others as well as myself.

That last sentence sums up the life of Bill "Thunder" Thornton. He was a man that created decades old memories for me, Ken Najarian, Jim Stivers, and the rest of the Husker Nation that has been around since the start of the sellout streak.

In 2009, *HuskerPedia* will create a new award called the "Thunder" award that will be given each year to a graduating senior on the football team that exemplifies the character that Thunder displayed his entire life. That is the least that can be done for a player and a person who helped define what Nebraska football is really about. **MSP**

David Max is the co-founder of *HuskerPedia.com* with another native Nebraskan, Joe Hudson. He grew up in Page and Ainsworth and is a graduate of Kearney State College. His family has owned Nebraska season tickets since the south end zone was built in 1964.

Photo: David Max





# NEBRASKA GAMEDAYS

The More Things Change,  
the More They Stay the Same

by Mark Fricke

**"E**verybody in the remotest degree of sympathy with the Nebraska team wore the new colors of scarlet and cream in some form or forms."

Those words opened a *Hesperian* newspaper story about an 1892 Nebraska home football game, but those words ring just as true over 100 years later. Nebraska football fans deck themselves in every manner of red. From their heads, to their toes, to the very vehicles that brought them to their destination. Gameday in Lincoln arrives like a high, holy day to some. It is a ritual that has played out 649 times in the Capital City.

Today, gameday to some may mean prime rib at Misty's or a beer at the Sidetrack. Maybe it requires a ritual visit to the Huskers Authentic store to pick up another trinket to add to an already growing collection of memorabilia. Gameday is about more than just the game, it is big business.

A survey by the Bureau of Business Research compiled

for the University of Nebraska estimated that each home game in Lincoln created almost \$34 million in total revenue spent in the community. Nearly 100,000 people swell the streets of downtown Lincoln.

The numbers become even more impressive when the team is having a successful campaign. A recent study by the Platte Institute for Economic Research determined that when the Cornhuskers finished in the top five of the college football rankings, everything from per capita income to employment rates go up across the entire state of Nebraska. It found that when the Huskers won a national championship, per capita income in Nebraska rose by 7.48%. When the Huskers finished unranked it rose only 5.7%.

But the question arises, does fan support really grow as the team gets better? Or does the team get better because fan support grows?



"It's really kind of a chicken or the egg thing," admitted Hall of Fame coach and current University of Nebraska Athletic Director Tom Osborne. He noted the fans have always been there "no matter what kind of weather, through the highs and lows of performance."

It is clearly a symbiotic relationship. One feeds off the other. Without football there would be no gameday. But to understand Nebraska football you must understand "gameday." And to understand "gameday" you must understand Nebraska football history.

Before they had national champions to cheer for, before they were dubbed "the greatest fans in college football," even before the team was known as the Cornhuskers, Nebraska football fans cherished gameday.

From the very start, on a YMCA field in Omaha on Thanksgiving Day in 1890, the Nebraska football fans caught the eye of observers. The newspaper account of Nebraska's very first football game started off with a nod to the faithful supporters.

"The party that gathered at the B&M station to take the 8:09 train to Omaha was not large, but in enthusiasm more than made up for lack of numbers," noted the *Hesperian*.

In the early years, when the team had no stadium or true field to regularly call home, the train station was the congregational point for revelers. Whether it was groups of well wishers and band members cheering their boys on their way, or welcoming them back in victory or defeat, the train depot was the epicenter of celebrations. Nebraska's football squad played a total of 11 games in their first three years with only three of those occurring in Lincoln. So the sending off of the team and the welcome home often became the only manner of celebration available.

Nebraska fans would swarm to the local train station early in the morning to cheer their warriors off to their destinations. Cadet bands played while fans recited chants that often contained verses in Latin, so as to put their schooling to good use. Those lucky enough to join the team on the train would keep the revelry going with loud yells and songs that often stunned the train's regular passengers.

Back home, students would congregate on campus waiting for word of the final score to be telegraphed back home. When the team was victorious, a red light was illuminated in the State University Hall tower and the school chapel bell would be rung, and once again the air in Lincoln would be filled with song.

Nebraska's very first home game came on Halloween Day in 1891 when Doane came to play Nebraska at Lincoln Park. As was often the case, the game required the use of advertising to make fans aware. No formal schedules were published and often games were hastily assembled a few days in advance. Committees from each school printed up flyers and posted them across town hoping to draw crowds. Despite competing with a baseball game on a nearby field, over 800 fans attended the game and several carriages decked out in school colors gave a show of pride from the fans. Nebraska won that game 28-4, but began their tradition of serving as gracious hosts by inviting the visiting team to a night at the theater before heading home.

With the season opener of 1892, Nebraska fans got their first true big gameday. The University of Illinois came to town for a tussle and the fans were ready. Newspaper accounts gave flowery details on the enthusiastic streams of fans that assembled for the game. *The Nebraska State Journal* told of "co-eds... out in force and yards of ribbon," and of a "tallyho coach [covered] outside and inside with banners and flags and streamers of the scarlet and cream."

The fans loved the Nebraska boys, although they didn't have any particular name to refer to them. Nicknames for sports teams were not common at that time even at the professional level. Most often they were merely employed by sportswriters who needed hyperbole to fill up their stories. The Nebraska team had been referred to as "old gold" in the early years and even "rattlesnake boys" and "antelopes." The lack of capitalization showed the informality of the



*Husker fans wait at the train station to welcome the team home from Notre Dame in 1924.*



names. But the newspaper story of the first big gameday in Lincoln included a brief sentence that would become notable when viewed in a historical perspective.

"A hard fought game resulted in a score of 6 to 0 in favor of the bug eaters," wrote an anonymous *Nebraska State Journal* scribe, unaware that this passing use of an adjective for the football team would catch on as a popular *post facto* nickname for early Nebraska football teams many years later.

That story also set the stage for what gameday in Lincoln would be like for the next century.

"The crowd went down to Lincoln Park with colors flying and horns blowing," it stated. "They came back with colors wildly waving, horns the worse for wear and throats uttering the Uni yell as well as possible after two hours of constant cheering."

One early staple in the gameday rituals of Nebraska fans was the weekly "Pep Rally." A furious social event that no student, male or female, would dare miss.

Thousands of students would gather inside Memorial Hall to hear motivational speeches from the school's chancellor. The sometimes unruly students gave rousing "honks" to any mention of the players. The "Yell Squad" unveiled new songs and cheers. Fans quickly learned their parts for the important shouts including that important Uni yell...

U-U-U-N-I  
Ver-Ver-Ver-Si-Ti  
N-E-Bra-Ski  
Ooooh-My

Fans were led in songs that featured customized lyrics often set to melodies familiar to students of the time, such as "Take Me Out To The Ball Game." One such parody sung to the tune of a popular song at the time entitled "Waltz Me Around Again, Willie" featured odd lyrics that chided the Kansas team and praised one of Nebraska's big back fielders.

"Back to the hay again, Jayhawks. Skidoo-skidoo-skidoo. Your cows are a-bawling, your co-eds are calling. And don't let Bill Johnson get through," the song said.

Special cheers were developed for each opponent, hoping to knock them off their game. No student would leave the hall until they had their parts down pat. In case the previous night's revelry weakened their memory, the cheers were printed in the next day's newspaper for a quick refresher.

One pep rally saw the unveiling of a banner that was worthy of mention in the contemporary stories and gave a curious note of familiarity to fans today.



*Same as now, the stadium was packed on gameday, as evident in this photo from 1923.*

"A cream banner bearing in scarlet a ghostly skull and pair of bones was carried at the end of a twenty foot bamboo pole and waved vigorously for Nebraska." It was an eerie symbol that would re-appear at Nebraska football games a century later in honor of the Nebraska "Blackshirt" defense.

Fan enthusiasm wouldn't dampen in defeat either. Following a particularly heart-wrenching loss to Illinois in 1904, hundreds of fans still showed up at the train station to welcome the team back. The players were hoisted onto shoulders, then transferred to flower-laden carriages for a parade through town.

"This was the biggest lesson in college spirit ever taught at Nebraska," noted the school yearbook. "The team had lost its biggest game, yet no squad had ever been received with such pomp and display.

"It seemed at last that people were beginning to understand the real business of football in a university."

While decorum and hospitality remain a cornerstone for Nebraska football fans as much today as they did then, there was still no doubt that gamedays meant real business in cash registers back then just as they do today.

The school quickly began recognizing the profits that the sport was generating. By 1906 the football team was earning over \$14,000 a year in revenues, enough to pay the expenses of the football team and every other varsity sport. Local merchants were also enjoying the fruits of the sport. Advertisements would show up every game week hawking buttons, ribbons, coats, and much more for the fans willing to part with their monies.

Nebraska's ability to fill the stands allowed the team to schedule first-tier opponents that other schools in the West could only dream of. Since opponents often shared revenues from admissions, Nebraska's large crowds meant good money





*Some things about gameday have changed. In 1910, "girls" were regulated to their own section of the stadium.*

for visiting teams. Powerhouses like Minnesota, Chicago, Syracuse, and even Notre Dame gladly made the trip to Lincoln to play the Cornhuskers. Bigger crowds meant bigger games. Bigger games meant bigger paydays. Bigger paydays meant more money for better facilities. Better facilities meant better teams. Better teams meant better crowds. The "chicken or the egg" dance between Nebraska football fans and the football team had begun.

Gameday in Lincoln had become a right of fall passage. An economic tool, a social event, and much more. It may be surprising to learn that there was a moment when gameday could have become illegal in the state of Nebraska.

The problems arose in 1897 following the death of a Doane College student while playing football. The game was a brutal one in those days, with helmets and padding nonexistent and the entire concept of the game was to see which team could outmuscle and sometimes out-punch the opponent. Often times fans would insert themselves into the action as well, requiring security forces to be on hand at any game.

The reaction to the tragedy at Doane was a legislative proposal to simply ban the sport of football altogether. A bill was proposed in the Nebraska State Assembly that threw down severe penalties for anyone who played, supported, or even watched a football game.

The bill declared the sport abolished and that any person who "shall engage as principal in any game of Foot Ball within the state of Nebraska, ... shall... be fined in any sum not less than Twenty Dollars, nor more than One Hundred Dollars and imprisoned in the County Jail not less than Ten Days." Fines of that level were princely sums in those days and adding jail time to the punishment added to the clout.

Not satisfied with focusing on the players of the game, the bill's draconian tone even wanted to make it illegal to

watch a football game. Violators were subject to \$25 fines. To add even more fuel to the fire, the bill attempted to turn citizens against themselves by offering payment of half of the collected fines to any person who turned in such heinous criminals.

The bill managed to make it to a first reading before the State Assembly before things turned ugly. Nebraska football fans raised their voices and fought against the bill. Newspapers were littered with commentaries that chided the politicians for even considering such nonsense. Once many of the elected officials saw the number of loud and proud football fans they had in their jurisdiction they quickly cowered. No politician, it seemed, wanted to go on record

as even considering the sport's banishment from the state. The bill died without even so much as a discussion on the floor.

Football fans in Nebraska showed early that they had power that went far beyond the gridiron, and the tradition of gameday was preserved for Cornhusker posterity. The tradition survived two World Wars, several controversial coaching changes, and a program that festered through many dreary years. The fruits of their patience and support began to bloom in the 1960s and '70s when sellout crowds watched as the team evolved into national champions. A further study of the partnership with the fans came with the adoption of Nebraska's first formal mascot, "Harry Husker," a pennant waving man fully decked out in red Cornhusker fan apparel. The team showed that it was the fans that best reflected the image of what Nebraska football was all about.

Later into the 1980s and '90s when the football team became a powerhouse, the fans were once again singled out when they were dubbed "the Greatest Fans in College Football," and honored as such over the entranceway to Memorial Stadium.

New gameday traditions replaced old ones through the years. Where once existed formal yells and tallyho wagons, now there is "Sirius" blasted through loud speakers and tailgate parties. Ribbons of scarlet and cream have given way to replica jerseys.

But, regardless of the dressings and traditions that have changed through the years, "Gameday" remains the heart of the Nebraska football experience. **MSP**

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Journalist and historian Mark Fricke is the author of two books on college football history and has published several articles on Nebraska football history. Fricke currently lives in Kalamazoo, MI where he works in radio sales and as a professional sports announcer.



# PAY DIRT! TOUCHDOWN! SIX POINTS!

by Mark Fricke

**T**he game of football has always been about reaching the goal line. The touchdown is the ultimate measure of success for any play. Through the years, and despite several changes to the dynamics, the touchdown remains the symbol of success in football.

The word “touchdown” originated because the original rules of the game called for the ball to literally be touched to the ground at the goal line, hence a “touch down.” Whenever a player carried the ball over the goal line he was required to literally touch the ball on the ground. The spot where that touch down occurred was important because, in early rules, it was a factor in where the point-after attempt was made. A touch down close to the sidelines could mean a tough extra point attempt angle.

Starting in 1906, the forward pass came into play, adding the end zone and giving teams a new way to score. Other changes have come to the touchdown over the years, most notably in its point value. In early years a touchdown was worth just four points. The rules officials realized the importance of the goal in 1897 and raised its value to five points. It wasn't until 1912 that the touchdown was given the full six-point credit it enjoys today.

The Nebraska Cornhuskers have always been adept at scoring touchdowns. This season, when Nebraska scores their 28th touchdown of the year they will notch their 4,000th regular season touchdown. Add in championship games and bowls and Nebraska puts another 147 touchdowns on the board. The Cornhuskers have set NCAA records in touchdowns scored that still hold up today.

In honor of the Cornhuskers' upcoming 4,000th regular season touchdown, here's a look at a few memorable and milestone regular season TDs.



## **#1-1890 vs. OMAHA YMCA**

After staking an early 6-0 lead thanks to three safeties, left end Albert Troyer plunged through the line to give Nebraska their historic first touchdown and cap a 10-0 victory to boot.

**#380-1906 vs. Hastings.** Nebraska's first touchdown pass. The new forward pass rule was met with a great deal of skepticism in Nebraska, but they wasted little time in taking advantage in their first game of 1906. Quarterback Dale Drain tossed a pass to John Mason who scampered 70-yards to log Nebraska's first aerial score.

**#533-1910 vs. Haskell.** Nebraska hit the 533 mark by scoring a record-setting 20th touchdown in their game against Haskell as they strolled to a 119-0 win. Harry Rathbone logged a team-high seven touchdowns that day, a Nebraska record!

**#1,000-1930 vs. Iowa State.** Nebraska hit the century mark in all-time touchdowns in the third game of the 1930 season with a Harold Frahm touchdown in the opening period.

**#1,572-1961 vs. South Dakota.** It may have seemed like a routine 20-yard pass from Larry Tomlinson to John Faiman, but it was the first touchdown scored in the Devaney era and ushered in an unprecedented reign of success.

**#1,937-1971 vs. Oklahoma.** Johnny Rodgers fields a punt, then twists and turns his way to immortality as he scores one of college football's most memorable touchdowns in one of the sport's greatest games.

**#2,000-1972 vs. Kansas State.** A 12-yard pass from Steve Runty to Bill Olds marked the Huskers' 2,000th TD in the next to last home game of coach Bob Devaney's career.





*Mike Rozier scored a lot of touchdowns in his career with the Huskers, including #2,535.*

**#2,332–1979 vs. Oklahoma.** The infamous “Fumbleroosky.” Trailing 17–7 in the fourth quarter, coach Tom Osborne reached into his bag of tricks for a play that called for the center to snap the ball, and the quarterback to immediately lay the ball on the ground for a pseudo-fumble. While the entire offense acted like the play went one way, a guard picked up the loose ball and ran the other direction. Husker guard Randy Schleusener ran the play to perfection for a memorable score in a losing cause.

**#2,535–1983 vs. UCLA.** Starting at the visitors’ two yard line, Mike Rozier went sideline to sideline before entering the end zone, covering over 80 total yards of turf in the process. The TD sealed Tom Osborne’s 100th career victory.

**#3,000–1991 vs. Utah State.** Calvin Jones darted in from 19-yards out in the second period for the landmark score as Nebraska crushed Utah State 71–14.

**#3,039 1991 vs. Kansas.** When Calvin Jones scampered across the goal line for his sixth touchdown that day, he didn’t set a touchdown record (see #533) but thanks to the reduced

value of touchdowns in earlier decades, he did establish a new Nebraska single game scoring record with 36 points.

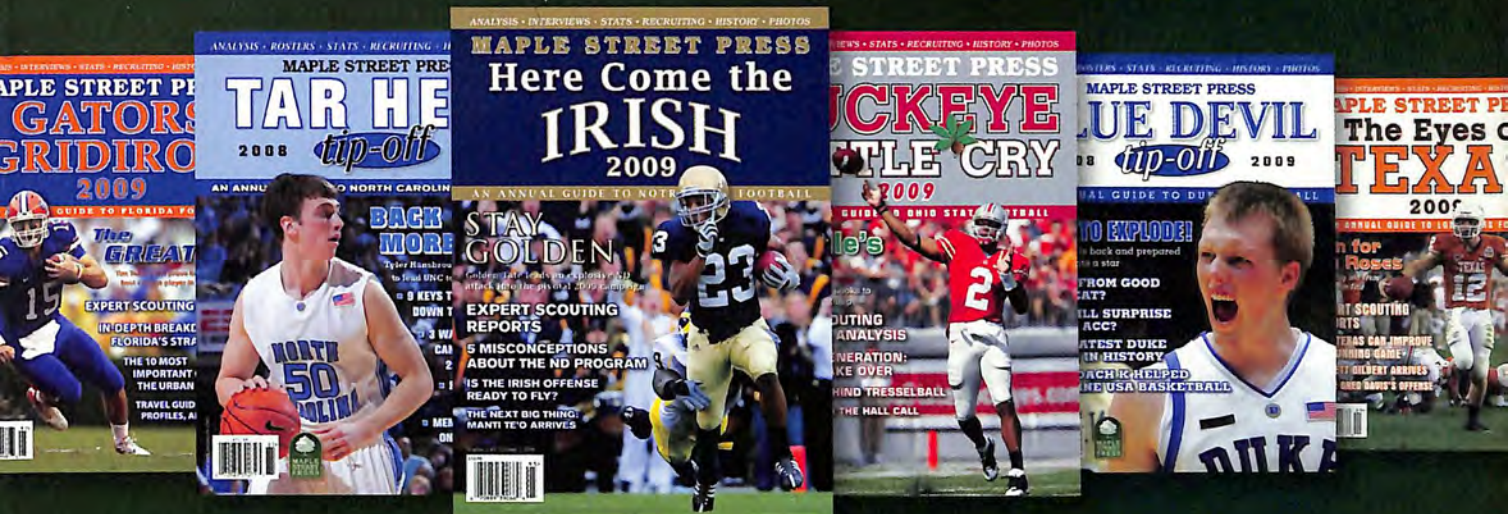
**#3,418–1997 vs. Missouri.** Dubbed everything from the “Flea-kicker” to the “Miracle In Missouri,” there has probably been no more dramatic a game-changing touchdown than when Scott Frost’s pass deflected off of Shevin Wiggins’s foot and into the arms of Matt Davison. The catch sent a thrilling game into overtime where Nebraska pulled out a victory and preserved an undefeated season.

**#3,641–2001 vs. Oklahoma.** It was known in the play-book as “Black Flash Reverse Pass” but when Eric Crouch cradled a pass from Mike Stuntz, who had taken a pitch from Thunder Collins, who had taken a handoff from Crouch, it became a legendary touchdown play for Nebraska.

**#4,000–TBD MSP**

Journalist and historian Mark Fricke is the author of two books on college football history and has published several articles on Nebraska football history. Fricke currently lives in Kalamazoo, MI.





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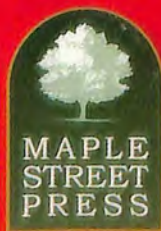
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